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MULTILINGUALISM IN THE DAILY LIFE OF COMPANIES. WHAT CHALLENGES FOR SLOVAKIA?

François-Xavier Mortreuil - Mária Rošteková*

Through their activities, the Slovak-French University Institute (IUFS) located in Banská Bystrica, and its member institutions are striving to link theory and practise in education to help their students succeed in a competitive labour market. To achieve this objective, the IUFS organises a “Students-Companies-Universities Forum” every year, whose aim is to offer enterprises an opportunity to present themselves, their business activities and sectors of activities to universities, secondary school-students and new graduates in Slovakia who are ready to contribute to the development of their structures. This event is also an opportunity for universities to share information about their existing study programs and respective needs, and to discuss possible cooperation with company representatives.

National and foreign companies deal increasingly with a lack of qualified employees with the necessary knowledge and skills, not only technical and administrative, but also linguistic and communicative, where a good command of a foreign language plays a crucial role. That is why the 8th edition of the Forum that took place on 4 April 2019 at the Faculty of Economics in Banská Bystrica, focused on the need to know and use several foreign languages in daily professional life.

Three company representatives who communicate daily in foreign languages not only with clients but internally as well, took part in the Forum round-table discussions: **Zuzana Mate** (Dell company), **Michal Kucej** (Slavia

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Production Systems) and **Petronela Chovaníková** (Veolia Energia). They showed what role foreign languages other than English have within their companies and explained which languages are required depending on the job. Then they answered questions regarding the language level required at hiring, the way it is evaluated and advantages offered to employees who develop their foreign language skills.

Two other speakers confirmed the importance of language mastery during the recruitment process. **Nikol Richterová** from Profesia.sk, the most visited job portal in Slovakia, enriched the debates by relying on statistics regarding, *inter alia*, the most popular languages in job vacancies, with French holding its rightful place. **Alžbeta Spišiaková**, from the EURES Job Mobility Portal (EURES), informed the public on the evolution of the European employment market and demonstrated the possibilities offered by the employment database across the European Union. In her view, EURES is much more than a job portal, because EURES provides its services through a human network composed of nearly a thousand advisors, who are in contact with jobseekers and employers from all over Europe on a daily basis.

All the guests clearly confirmed that while fluency in English is taken for granted, knowledge of other foreign languages such as French is a definite advantage in the labour market as it brings career opportunities and multiplies chances to find more interesting and better-paid jobs. To prepare themselves for the labour market and to get hired, high school students and university students in the audience were invited to develop their communication skills using every possibility offered by the Slovak education system.

High school and university students were also able to benefit from the company presentations shown during the Forum: CONTINENTAL, DELL, FRANCESCA CREATION, HENKEL, ING Business Shared Services, ISK, LAFARGE HOLCIM, SIEMENS, SLAVIA PRODUCTION SYSTEMS, TESCO. They had an opportunity to visit their stands as well as those of universities and IUFS member institutions. As a part of its program, Matej Bel University (UMB) prepared two interesting workshops: the first one dedicated to concentration and focus skills, logical reasoning and English testing by PwC, the second one dedicated to a course in accelerated foreign language understanding entitled "Intercomprehension."

The Forum was opened by His Excellency Mr. **Christophe Léonzi**, French Ambassador in Slovakia, Mr. **Ján Lunter**, president of the Banská Bystrica region, Mr. **Vladimír Hiadlovský**, president of the Matej Bel University in

Banská Bystrica and Mr. **Radovan Gura**, director of the French-Slovak University Institute.

The French Ambassador underlined the importance of economic relations between France and Slovakia with trade amounting to EUR 7 billion, as well as the attractiveness of Slovakia, which has led to the establishment of 450 subsidiaries of French companies in various sectors such as the automobile industry, engineering, consultancy, civil engineering, energy and water treatment, telecommunications, and even banks, sports facilities, etc. He also mentioned the existence of several shared resource centres that, although being physically located in Slovakia, work on cases involving one of their subsidiaries hundreds of kilometres away from Bratislava, cases that must be treated in the language of the country, be it a service contract, an invoice, a customer service issue or even a legal dispute.

The President of the largest region of Slovakia expressed his support for this kind of university activities and stressed the importance of the French-Slovak cooperation for our region. Through his own incentive stories, he emphasized the importance of foreign languages as multilingualism allows for successful career paths.

According to the rector, UMB considers internationalisation of education a strategic objective of institutional development and in this matter, the French-Slovak initiatives, led by the IUFS, occupy an undisputed place. A good example is Slovak students receiving their French diplomas in November 2017 on the actual premises of the Faculty of Economics of Matej Bel University.

The importance of foreign languages in the professional world

With the enlargement of the European Union and their close link with the complex phenomenon of globalisation (Rosputinský, 2016), languages are more sought after than ever before. The demand for language and communication skills is constantly increasing in the labour market. Foreign language skills are playing an increasingly important role in strengthening the employability of young people and preparing them to work in the international labour market. They are also a factor of competitiveness: weak language skills cause many companies to lose market shares and handicap workers who want to find a job abroad.

Although English has been the most important language of trade and technology for many years, other languages play a significant role. These include French, which is the 2nd business language in Europe and the third in

the world, and German, which is becoming more and more widespread and the most widely spoken language in Europe as a mother tongue.

The importance of use of foreign languages for companies

With the enlargement of the European Union and its link with the complex phenomenon created by globalisation, foreign languages importance has grown. Due to the diversity of their contacts, companies are increasingly looking for several languages communication ability for new recruited staff. For companies, the challenge is of huge importance, a lack of foreign language communication ability will make them lose some market shares. For job seekers, being recruited quickly and well by companies settled in Slovakia or abroad requires having several foreign languages communication skills, only option to be able to be well integrated in a globalized world.

Even if English language has been mainly used for commercial exchanges and scientific publications, some other languages have become more and more important. French language is one of them, as 2nd business language in Europe and 3rd used business language worldwide. German is also an important language as it is the most spoken one as mother tongue in Europe (around 100 million native speakers).

As mentioned, the need to use several foreign languages in Slovakia comes from the globalisation of business activity. To understand this phenomenon, we can have a look on the business relationship of France and Slovakia.

In 2017, bilateral exchanges have reached more than 7 billion Euro representing +7.3% compared to the previous year. These exchanges are in favour of Slovakia with 4.4 billion Euros (+8.6%) exported to France vs 2.7 billion Euros imported from France to Slovakia (+5.2%).

France is mainly importing from Slovakia: products from automotive sector for more than 50% - essentially cars, mechanical products, electronic and IT products and other industrial products. On the other hand, Slovakia top five importations from France are products from automotive sector (39%), industrial products other than automotive for 36.6%, mechanical and electrical equipment (20.5%) and chemical and cosmetic products.

French companies based in Slovakia have a diversified profile. Since 2004, the number of French companies settling in Slovakia has been multiplied by three, reaching more than 400 companies and branches nowadays. The biggest, PSA (Peugeot-Citroën) arrived in 2003, quickly followed by other companies working in the automotive sector such as Faurecia. In the

mechanical and steel industry: Dirickx, Arcelormittal, Orefi. In the food industry: Fromageries Bel, Bongrain, Lesaffre. In the plastic industry: PlasticOmnium, Novares (former Mecaplast) or Bourbon. In chemistry and drug industry: Sanofi, Aventis, Biofarma, Boiron, In the construction sector: Vinci, Colas, Eurovia, Eiffage. Some electrical equipment are made by Schneider, Alcatel, Areva and finally services are proposed by French companies Orange, AXA, Société Générale, Veolia or Mazars. There are also an increasing number of Decathlon sport shops in Slovakia.

The reasons these French companies have chosen Slovakia are various: location, as Slovakia is the heart of Central Europe it represents a perfect hub. Slovakia is member of the UE since 2004 and has adopted Euro currency in 2009, avoiding potential currency exchange fluctuations. Slovakia is also having a regular grow of its economy making investors confident. The Labour law of Slovakia is also flexible enough to proceed to adjustment when required. Finally, Slovakia is having a tax system that is providing advantages to foreign companies, which is very attractive for investors.

Being based in Slovakia but dealing with all Europe and the whole world is requiring several employees from these French companies to speak English but also French in order to attend group meetings, conference calls, trainings in France, and to deal with key French customers who always appreciate business partners to speak their language. Therefore, being able to communicate in English and in French has become a string benefit for a better recruitment and a faster evolution within the company.

To conclude, it has also to be reminded that not only French companies are looking for French speakers. Slovakia is welcoming several business resources share centres from international companies (Amazon, Kone, Accenture, Lafarge-Holcim, Telekom...) who are also dealing with French speaking customers or suppliers or subcontractors on everyday bases. Altogether, this phenomenon has made the French speaking ability becomes a strong added value on the Slovak market place. Recent study of average recruited salary has shown the trend with best average salary proposed to English plus French speakers followed by English plus German speakers.

Assets and challenges of multilingualism in Slovak schools

Foreign language education represents one of the top priorities of any European education system, as this field is different from that of other subjects taught. The enlargement of the European Union in 2004 with the accession of

ten new Member States increased the importance of language policies in all Member States. The EU language policy has two objectives: firstly, to protect a large language diversity in Europe and secondly, to encourage learning of currently spoken languages. Although this has led in some countries to accentuate an already present long-term trend, rooted in the specific historical conditions of these countries, for example in Slovakia (Hanesová, 2015), other countries have seen major evolutions which can be interpreted as a reflection of societal, political and cultural changes.

As a result of such European dynamics, foreign language teaching has become much more deeply embedded in education systems. For Europeans, knowing several languages has become mandatory in everyday life as well as at work, especially for world awareness and intercultural dialogue (Bírová, 2013; Mešková, 2016; Rošková, 2006), tolerance, mobility during studies or even for the labour market. However, multilingualism, which exists in Europe on a continental level as well as on a national and regional level, regularly raises very complex issues such as how to organise that language diversity. New approaches to multilingualism in Europe, such as intercomprehension (Chovancová, 2008; Kubeková, 2017) seem to provide more satisfactory answers to some of the emerging challenges.

According to political discourse, Slovak reforms take into account trends observed in the European context. Concerning foreign language teaching and learning, Slovakia was actively involved in various support programmes (Kubeková, 2018). The most important step was the Millennium Programme adoption in 2001. One of the most important objectives of this Programme was the introduction of a first mandatory foreign language and a second foreign language, also mandatory but chosen from a list. This objective was achieved throughout the 2011/2012 school year with English becoming the first mandatory foreign language taught from the third year of primary education (8-year-old pupils). The second foreign language was mandatory between the sixth and ninth year of the primary education (pupils aged between 12–15 years). Through a subsequent adjustment, the second foreign language was introduced from the second year of the second cycle of primary education (pupils aged from 11 years). That experimentation ended in 2015 as the second foreign language became facultative.

Recently we have observed some “linguistic reconfiguration” in the Slovak education system related to the wider range of languages offered, which causes a decline of the so-called “traditional” and prestigious languages, especially

German and French (Rošteková, 2019). At the same time, these languages will continue to play a very important role given the German and French presence in the Slovak economy, a reality reflected in job offers in the Slovak labour market. Mastery of these two languages is essential and many employers have found it difficult to hire candidates with a language skill level that matches their expectations (from B1 to C1 according to CEFR). We cannot neglect close bilateral relations that the Slovak republic has with France and Germany. The bilateral relation with France is framed by a strategic partnership agreement, signed in 2008 in Paris and renewed for the years 2013–2018. In this agreement, the educational component holds a very important place.

The change in the status of foreign languages (the second foreign language ceasing to be mandatory and becoming facultative) is often associated with the decline of foreign language skill among learners (the lower level is also observed in the case of the first language foreign language, but it is much more obvious for the second language). While language policies in Slovakia aim to implement European recommendations in terms of the diversification of languages learned and the building of multilingual skills, they should also consider the realities of the labour market and social representations regarding languages, in order to develop properly adapted school curricula and pedagogical approaches (Rošteková, 2019).

In this respect, the importance of joint or double degree study programs offered by several Slovak universities in cooperation with French universities should be emphasized. French know-how for professionalizing higher education is equally important: the French experience in the field of cultural diplomacy is special and, in our opinion, unmatched at the global level (Gura, 2011). The French-Slovak University Institute (IUFS), institution founded in 2011 at Matej Bel University of Banská Bystrica, which intends to ensure the sharing of French know-how in Slovakia, also demonstrates the importance of the French-Slovak cooperation.

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