

## FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING – A EUROPEAN PRIORITY, A NECESSITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE GLOBALIZATION ERA

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*Uniunea Europeană încurajează învățarea a cel puțin două limbi străine de către cetățenii săi. Pentru a atinge aceste obiective, instituțiile europene dezvoltă noi programe și metode de predare și învățare. Programe precum: Socrates, Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci sau Media și Cultură sprijină comunicarea multilingvă și multiculturală. Anul european al limbilor 2001 a avut ca obiectiv general: încurajarea învățării limbilor străine de către toate persoanele care locuiesc în Europa. De asemenea, a avut cinci obiective specifice: popularizarea diversității lingvistice și culturale în Europa; încurajarea multilingvismului; promovarea beneficiilor conferite de stăpânirea mai multor limbi; promovarea învățării limbilor pe tot parcursul vieții; promovarea diferitelor metode de predare și învățare. În ceea ce privește multilingvismul, a concluzionat că “limba maternă plus două” este un obiectiv fundamental al educației. Rezoluția Consiliului privind promovarea diversității lingvistice și a învățării limbilor conține o serie de recomandări adresate statelor membre. Printre acestea: să ia măsuri pentru a oferi elevilor posibilitatea de a învăța două sau mai multe limbi; să promoveze învățarea limbilor străine în cadrul învățării pe tot parcursul vieții; să ofere, prin programele de studiu și obiectivele educaționale, o atitudine pozitivă față de alte limbi și culturi și să stimuleze abilitățile de comunicare interculturală. În același timp, predarea și învățarea limbilor străine reprezintă o provocare și o necesitate pentru învățământul superior în societatea cunoașterii și în era globalizării. Această provocare se referă la limbile străine ca instrumente de comunicare și căi de acces la cunoaștere. Competențele de comunicare*

*în limbi străine sunt esențiale pentru studenți și personalul didactic, pentru educația academică și cercetarea științifică, pentru mobilitate și internaționalizare. Organizarea predării și învățării limbilor străine reprezintă o provocare pentru managementul academic. Învățarea pe tot parcursul vieții a limbilor străine ar trebui să fie o prioritate pentru instituțiile de învățământ superior.*

**Key words:** *teaching, learning, foreign languages, new programmes and methods, multilingualism, mother tongue plus two, higher education, specialized communication, scientific research, lifelong learning of languages*

### **The Foreign Languages in the European Union Policy**

Language is the hallmark of individual identity. In a Union defined by linguistic and cultural diversity, communication can be a problem. In the European Union there are about 40 languages, with different institutional status. Knowledge of other languages is a condition for understanding the others, for dialogue and collaboration. Initiation in other idioms also opens ways to foreign cultures and new spiritual worlds. Last but not least, it is a necessity for the European citizens' freedom of movement and the choice of a workplace place within the Union[1]. The complex communication involves all other values: peace, unity, solidarity, security, etc. Therefore, knowledge, preservation and dissemination of European languages are an outstanding goal of the official policy. The European Union encourages the learning of at least two foreign languages by its citizens. To achieve these objectives, it develops programs and new teaching methods in the field. The measure is based on Council Resolution of March 1995 on improving the quality of language learning.

Through its educational activities, the Socrates Program aims to encourage language exchanges between young people and training for language teachers. It also offers adults the opportunity to engage in lifelong learning, which includes languages. The Erasmus Program gives students the chance to study abroad and provides training classes.[3] A program for the youth, it creates a framework for foreign language learning through mobility and exchanges. The Leonardo da Vinci training program aims to improve occupational mobility, multilingual and multicultural

communication in the work environments. Also in the area of open access to other languages, the Media program supports the distribution and subtitling of films, whereas the Culture 2000 program encourages translation and access to books and reading. [2]Such programs develop new methods of language learning that contribute to experimentation and process quality. Various community programs support the use of new information and communication technologies in language teaching. The eLearning initiative helps European education and training systems to adapt themselves to the new economic, social and cultural environment created by digital technologies.

One of the priorities is language learning. To support and develop these programs, the European Union deploys constant funding efforts. Under the Lingua element of the Socrates program, institutions from different countries are financed to collaborate in the development of innovative language learning materials. [5]It also supports projects that encourage language learning by making people aware of the benefits involved, by providing information and by improving access to resources. Under the Comenius element of the same program, the Union invests millions of euros annually in exchanges of experience in the field of languages between schools in different countries, in training teachers and providing foreign language teachers for schools and adult education centers. The Leonardo da Vinci vocational training program provides funding for multinational projects developing new language teaching methods and materials. [3]

The Commission also financed 199 projects for the European Year of Languages 2001. These were aimed at the official languages of the European Union or national, regional and minority languages and languages outside Europe.

### **The European Year of Languages**

Under a decision of the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union of June 8, 2000, 2001 was declared the European Year of Languages. Its overall objective was to encourage language learning by all persons residing in Europe. The event was attended by 45 countries. The conduct of the event in the member states and the countries

of the European Economic Area was the responsibility of the European Commission. National implementation was managed by a network of Coordinating Bodies, appointed by national authorities. The Year was organized in collaboration with the Council of Europe.[14]

The decision stipulated that the official languages are Danish, English, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, and Swedish, to which Irish and Lëtzenbuergesch were added. At the same time, it opened the possibility for member states to include other languages. The event thus targeted all the languages used or learned by Europeans. Under the same decision that established the European Year of Languages 2001, five specific objective were set up: 1. to raise awareness of the wealth of linguistic diversity within the European Union and of its value in terms of civilization and culture; 2. to encourage multilingualism; 3. to bring to the notice of the widest possible audience the advantages of proficiency in several languages; 4. to encourage lifelong learning of languages; 5. to collect and disseminate information about the teaching and learning of languages.[8]

1. The European Year of Languages provided a framework for the various language communities in Europe to assert their presence and to promote their cultures and languages in a wider context. The projects addressed this objective to an extent of 94% and included 65 languages.

2. By including the official and local languages of communities, the European Year promoted the benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism. The projects showed that people are interested in language learning and communication.

3. The advantages of knowing several languages are widely recognized. The Eurobarometer survey showed that most Europeans are familiar with them. The European Year projects enabled thousands of students to understand the advantages of language knowledge and learn. The conferences and seminars were followed up by statements and strategies to the national and institutional policy makers to ensure diversity in the choice of languages learned.

4. The European Year's activities stressed that lifelong learning of languages starts in the earliest age and continues throughout the school years, professional and personal life. Many initiatives were unveiled,

promoting the beginning of language learning in the pre-primary and primary cycles. The conclusions highlighted a common belief that each phase of language learning in formal education systems must provide knowledge, skills and understanding on which learning can be built. Regarding adult education, focus is on three areas: professional development, integration with the local community and entertainment activities.

5. Many language schools opened to the public and presented new techniques for learning. National and regional authorities made printed or digital catalogs presenting their language courses. Seminars and conferences brought together experts from various countries to explain the latest developments in language teaching and learning.

Experts published handbooks for parents and schools, explaining the benefits of integrated learning of foreign languages (learning through a foreign language). As regards multilingualism, it was concluded that the “mother tongue plus two” is a fundamental objective of education. It was also stressed that a good knowledge of English is essential, though not sufficient. Graduates must have a high level of skill in communication, to obtain that knowledge to adapt and develop their linguistic repertoires. [11]

The measures provided for in the declaration included meetings and events at European and national levels, information and promotional campaigns, surveys and studies, a limited number of co-financed projects and moral support for activities not sponsored by the European Union.

The European Year of Languages 2001 provided national and regional authorities and NGOs the opportunity to discuss the topic of teaching and learning. Conferences, seminars, scientific events were arenas for discussion for decision makers, scientists and professionals in language teaching. From these discussions, documents emerged promoting multilingualism and linguistic diversity. Under their influence some changes have already occurred in language policies. The Year gave countries the opportunity to consider the implementation of the Council of Europe Language Portfolio and the Common European Framework of Reference. [7]

The Council Resolution of February 14, 2002 on the promotion of linguistic diversity and language learning objectives in implementing the

European Year of Languages 2001 puts forth a series of recommendations to the member states. Among them: to take the measures they deem appropriate to offer pupils, as far as possible, the opportunity to learn two, or where appropriate, more languages in addition to their mother tongues; to promote the learning of foreign languages by others in the context of lifelong learning; to ensure that study programs and educational objectives promote a positive attitude to other languages and cultures and stimulate intercultural communication skills from an early age.[10]

### **Foreign Languages Studying in Higher Education**

Academic education and scientific research for the Knowledge Society of Knowledge is built by means of education in general and in particular by the contribution of higher education.

Universities are the space of academic education, by means of which students and graduates obtain the professional competencies and qualifications in various specializations, with a view to integration in the labour market. Also, the institutions of higher education are the means of scientific research, in which there are put to work the competencies obtained by the graduates. University forms the elite for the socioeconomic environment, the qualified human resources that participate in building a Society based on Knowledge. Currently, European higher education is included in a wide scope reform, under the auspices of the Bologna Process.[10] This reform aims at changing European universities in inclusive and responsive university, with a view to a more ample objective: massification of higher education. Against this background, a paradox arises, which requires an ample discussion. By tradition, European higher education is addressed to the elites, having the mission of preparing elite graduates. European universities, from the setting up of the Bologna University, more than a millennium ago, are a space of academic education and elite scientific research. The idea of massification, that is the opening of universities and higher education to wide social masses could threaten this capacity, it could be associated with lowering the quality standards, with mediocrity. Massification must be understood in the sense of opening higher education to the society, extending its addressability to various social groups, including to the non-traditional ones.[9] The universities in

the Knowledge Society and globalization world must remain institutions of academic education of elite, of scientific research of excellence, which should prepare the elites of the present and of the future. Knowledge Society is built especially with the elites. Foreign languages, outstanding role in higher education and scientific research

In the diverse framework of the competencies that are formed in the space of academic education, the competencies of communication in foreign languages play a key role. Irrespective of the specialty studied by the student are mandatory disciplines to the training and formation of the student at the level of undergraduate studies and master's degree. The access to doctoral studies is conditioned on proving the competencies of communication in a language of universal circulation, mainly French or English. Be them students in Law, or Technical School, of Agronomy, Economics, Medicine, Arts, etc., all the young people involved in higher education training must learn and speak at least two foreign languages. [12] Moreover, the European policies in the field of multilingualism, developed by the European Union and Council of Europe, expressly state the necessity of learning at least two foreign languages by each citizen of Europe. Romanian higher education has assumed under its national and institutional policies this requirement and has created the conditions for turning this into reality. The curricular offer of the Moldovan universities includes mainly the languages English and French and also, often optionally or non-compulsorily, languages such as German, Spanish or Italian. Knowledge of foreign languages, the communication competencies in languages of international circulation represent a requirement for achieving Knowledge Society in the globalization age.[13]

### **Specialized Communication in Foreign Languages**

In Moldovan universities, the study of foreign languages is conducted under the auspices of communication. The education plans of various study programs comprise mandatorily the discipline: Specialized

Communication in a Foreign Language. This heading and the mandatory regime show the importance given to multilingual education of students in order to acquire competencies of communication in foreign languages. It is about competencies of understanding, expression, writing and reading,

of forming in students the capacity of thinking in a foreign language and of being able to express their thoughts fluently, coherent, rigorously from a logical point of view and correctly from a grammatical point of view. These courses are approached by virtue of a certain finality: pragmatic and efficient communication in a foreign language. An extension of perspective: instrument of communication and a means of knowledge.

Against this background, an observation must be made with regard to the way of approaching and receiving foreign languages. The study of foreign languages opens to students the access to an communication instrument, wide a wide international scope, especially when the foreign language is English. But foreign languages should not be regarded exclusively as communication instruments. Approaching foreign languages from this simple perspective presents the risk of becoming limitative. There is also the risk, and it is not just a risk, that the students should consider foreign languages as having a secondary role in the hierarchy of importance, dominated by the main disciplines.[5] Thus, to the Law students, the main role will be played by the legal disciplines, to the students of Economics, the economic disciplines, to those studying medicine, the medical ones, etc. By virtue of this perspective, foreign languages can be regarded as second rate disciplines in order of priority. That is why, foreign languages should also be approach as a means of knowledge. By means of English, for instance, undergraduate and graduate students, researchers, teaching staff have access to unlimited scientific resources, to bibliographical sources on printed support and on virtual support of a great variety. The entire scientific literature of the world from all fields of knowledge and cutting edge research is in English.[2] By revealing such a dimension of the foreign languages, we can express a pragmatic perspective in receiving and approaching them. Knowing this duality significantly opens the horizon of studying foreign languages, underscoring the importance and target of specialized courses.

### **Opportunities in Education, Formation, Research, Culture, Knowledge**

Studying foreign languages in university curricula opens to students important possibilities in the academic.



Education, in the field of formation, professional and personal development. Acquiring communication competencies in foreign languages presents a great importance for enlarging the information horizon in the specialization fields. By knowing foreign languages, students have access to vast bibliographical resources, concentrated in libraries or existing on the Internet. Thus, they will not be limited to the bibliography existent in the mother tongue, which drastically limits the scope of knowledge. [6] By the competence of communicating in foreign languages, undergraduate and graduate students have access to a means of information, documentation and knowledge, but also the communication instrument by means of which they can communicate the results of the study and researches by works presented conferences, workshops with scientific character. At the same time, the knowledge of foreign languages, which is improved and specialized during higher education studies, substantially contribute to extending the students' horizon of culture and knowledge by the access to a wide universal library, by means of languages such as English and French.

### **Multilingual Competencies – A Passport to the Professional and Personal Development**

Knowing foreign languages of international circulation such as English and French allows the undergraduate and graduate students to participate in academic mobility, to attend study sessions and modules in universities from other countries. Multilingual competencies also help students attend international programs and projects, cooperation and partnerships with universities in Europe and in the world. Knowledge of foreign languages facilitates to the graduates the continuation of their academic formation as part of the doctoral and postdoctoral studies, as well as the development in the field of scientific research. Also, the multilingual competencies create to the graduates a very important advantage in the integration in the labour market in European Union countries and in countries throughout the world and the development of success carriers. Knowing foreign languages is a passport, recorded in the Euro-pass, the European CV, to international professional and personal development of the holder.[4]

## **Foreign Languages for the Academic and Research Staff**

Foreign languages represent or should represent a priority to the teaching staff involved in various study cycles and programs, undergraduate and postgraduate, as well as to the scientific research staff. Acquiring communication competencies, the improvement and specialization of these competencies must be assumed as an academic and professional necessity. To the entire academic and research staff, as well as in case of undergraduate and graduate students, foreign languages fulfil the same two fundamental functions: international communication instrument and a means of knowledge. In the first role, the evolutions and openings in the European higher education, under the auspices of the Bologna process, offers the teaching and research staff important opportunities in the field of academic mobility, exchanges of experience, partnerships, cooperation and universities, faculties, departments, research institutes and other types of organizations from Europe and around the world.[14] Also, in each field of study, specialization, research and knowledge and in inter- and trans-disciplinary fields, there are held scientific conferences, international conferences or meeting of a smaller scope, seminars, round tables, workshops, etc. All these are conducted in languages of international circulation, especially English.

The competencies of communication in a foreign language are therefore a mandatory instrument for such academic experiences. In the second role, foreign languages represent an extremely important means of knowledge, given the fact that, as mentioned above, they open the access to practically unlimited bibliographical and scientific resources in all fields, under the form of printed publications or in a virtual format, online. The academic profile of a member of the teaching staff of a higher education institution can no longer be conceived today without this scientific opening created by knowledge of foreign languages. Thirdly, at European and world level, scientific research in all fields is expressed in languages of wide circulations, especially English. In order to have access to the results of scientific research in their fields of specialization, in order to be able at the same time to value and promote the results of own scientific research internationally, higher education teaching staff,

irrespective of specialization must have competencies of communication in foreign languages.[5]

Under the circumstances of Bologna reform, which aims at creating a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), a European Research Area (ERA), both united in the European Knowledge Area (EKA), European higher education tends to become a common space of knowledge, open also beyond the borders of Europe. In order to reach these objectives, for the free circulation and scientific and professional integration of graduates in various fields of specialization, in the European Knowledge Area, the curricula include the teaching of various disciplines in foreign languages. In order to be able to hold lectures in foreign languages, especially in English or French, a professor of law, economics, medicine, political sciences and engineering, must have communication competencies in the respective foreign language at the necessary academic standards. [3]

Such courses in various specializations are conducted as part of the curricula in foreign languages, by means of which universities create, by the diploma supplement, international openings and prospects of scientific development and integration in the European labour market. It is in this category that fall the courses in foreign languages, in most cases also in English and French, conducted in foreign universities, in Europe and in the world, part of the university programs and partnerships. It is also obvious that, in order to hold courses in foreign universities, the teaching staff involved in such programs must have the competencies of communicating in a foreign language at high standards.[17]

Another significant case where foreign languages are necessary is represented by the process of internationalizing studies, by means of which universities open their gates to foreign students by especially devised education programs. Such programs can be attended, in various years of study, specialization and knowledge, by students from within European Union, Europe and from beyond the borders of the continent, from throughout the world. Such educational programs are conducted in languages of wide international circulation, which thus prove their double quality of communication instruments and means of knowledge, by academic education and scientific research.[15]

## **Foreign Languages: Challenges at Managerial Level and Teaching Level**

The importance presented by foreign languages to education, formation, research, for professional development and personal development launches various challenges both at the managerial level of universities, faculties and departments, and at the level of the teaching process. Managerial challenges refer to the approach of the field of foreign languages in agreement with the cardinal importance of studying them and, consequently, to the development of policies to promote and develop the study of foreign languages. This includes curricula, curricular policies, educational plans, ensuring logistics and infrastructure, etc. This also includes encouraging academic mobility for students, teaching and research staff. In the spirit of European policies in the field, there must be supported the idea that each student must attend at least one semester of studies in a foreign university, to develop and consolidate their competence of communicating in foreign languages.[16] Managerial challenges also include the necessity of creating strong partnerships at national and international level between institutions, universities, faculties and departments, promoting study and research in the field of foreign languages by scientific conferences and publications. Studying foreign languages launch at the same time important challenges also at the level of the teaching-learning process. First of all, the study of foreign languages must be based on a pragmatic philosophy and approach. The act of teaching must descend the exclusively theoretical areas and regard teaching and learning foreign languages from the perspective of their practical finality. In other words, to non-philological faculties, the sense of studying foreign languages is, as shown above, to offer students competencies in specialized communication and an authorized means of access to the knowledge universe. That is why the study of foreign languages must be applied to the field of specialization, which may be law, political sciences, economy, medicine, technical sciences and engineering, etc., for the purpose of offering students communication competencies in these fields. Of course, besides this approach priority, foreign languages can and must be studied also from a wider perspective, as a means of access to the universe of culture and

knowledge.[17] The challenges addressed to specialized academic staff include the necessity of permanent modernization of the teaching methods, of diversifying the teaching and learning methods, the need for innovation and creativity in the process of studying foreign languages. Another problem refers to the difficulty presented by the heterogeneous public of students: they have a different educational background, covering a wide range of diversity, each having different competencies and needs in the study of foreign languages. The challenge refers to organizing students in groups per levels of study and the application of a diversity of methods in the process of teaching-learning, adequate to the level of each of them.

### **Conclusions**

Learning foreign languages is a priority of the policies of the European Union. Multilingual European citizens come to support communication against the background of the diversity comprised by the European States, diversity which regards nationality, language, identity, civilization, culture, spiritual, moral religious, social values, traditions, etc. Knowing languages of international circulation makes possible the interpersonal and inter-institutional communication inside this diversity that forms the spiritual legacy of Europe. In multilingual communication, the founding principle of the European Union finds its fundamental principle of achievement. Teaching and learning foreign languages fall under the scope of the mission of the education institution, both in secondary education and in higher education. In this respect, European policies develop the framework for multilingual education, promote methods and instruments of teaching and learning to facilitate and improve this chapter of priority importance of education.

The competencies of communication in foreign languages are acquired throughout the entire educational process. That is why teaching and learning foreign languages represent a permanent challenge and a priority to educational institutions. A target of exceptional importance is represented by the study of foreign languages in higher education. In universities, the regime of studying foreign languages is placed under the heading: Specialized communication in a foreign

language. At this level of training, foreign language must be regarded as an instrument of communication in the field of specialization and outside it, but also as a means of acceding to the universe of knowledge, given that the entire bibliography of the world, all knowledge or most of it exists in English and French. The competencies of communication in foreign languages represent a cardinal importance to the process of academic education and scientific research, to the personal and professional development. These competencies facilitate the access of students and teaching and research staff to academic mobility, exchanges of experience, partnerships, cooperation, European and international programs and projects and allows them to value and promote the results of scientific research, participate in congresses, conferences, workshops and in other events in the specialized fields or in inter- and trans-disciplinary fields. In higher education, curricula and special study modules, the competencies of communication in foreign languages of students, academic and research staff need to be developed, improved and specialized. A good command of foreign languages at academic standards at the level of higher education teaching staff facilitates conducting courses of foreign languages for own students or for other students in order to create international opening after graduation by the supplement to the diploma. It also makes possible the internationalization of higher education.

Learning, acquiring competencies of communication in foreign languages, improvement and perfecting such competencies must represent a subjective and objective necessity to each individual. Knowing at least one language of international circulation represents an instrument of communication and knowledge to each person, an important means of personal and professional development. At the same time, foreign languages, mother tongue plus two, as stated by the European policies in the field, represent a necessity formulated by the Knowledge Society. Under these circumstances, learning foreign languages must be assumed as a permanent necessity, as a continuous priority, as a process whose development framework comprises various forms of education according to the lifelong learning requirement.

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