

Importance of Foreign Languages in Education Process at Universities

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Abstract: Foreign languages and their usage is a part of common labour market requirements when applying for job after the university study. Language knowledge is a part of valid European documents in the field of education and the work policy reflecting the needs of recent multidimensional European labour market. Preparing, education process and further training must be necessarily performed in compliance with recent requirements where the continuous language learning should be an inseparable part of university study, oriented at the area of study, and aimed at future professional and job requirements. Based on the studied international documents, reports and recommendations as well as based on valid accreditation processes in the Slovak and Czech Republics was verified the implementation of foreign language education on the sample of future graduates and graduates of deliberately chosen study programs in social area and helping professions in the Slovak and Czech Republics. In the Slovak Republic was chosen a newly implemented study program in the higher educational territory where was expected the implementation of international documents. The respondents in both samples confirmed the importance for comprehensive language learning that should be a part of lifelong learning process, and inseparable part of education and training of social work professionals and professionals in helping professions included.

Keywords: *Foreign languages; European documents; helping professions; social work; market requirements.*

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1. Social policy and education

In long-term perspective European social policy and its proper implementation expects the sufficient number of educated people in many areas, the social area and helping professions included. Social policy is interested in a human being, his acceptance, views him from different points of view, mainly focuses on his support and solving his problems in the society or community he lives in, his acceptance in it, uniqueness, further development, existence and performance. Educational policy has been undergoing organizational and legislative changes; where the international practice understands education as a process to affect man, his status, process of preparing for professional practice as a part of employment policy. The achieved living standards in Europe and its sustainability relates to the quality of life, social security and safety, bound with increasing level of educated people with proper language and computer skills (Tomeš, 2011, p. 81). The EU does not have a unified approach to educational policy, even though it has approved a number of European and international programs aimed at the promotion of mutual exchanges, mobility and mutual understanding (Itzel, 2008, p.2-3). The educational policy of the individual EU Member States is the sum of EU activities and initiatives in the field of education, specialized training, where a part of it was stated as an agreement, but a part of them has direct impact on the Member States and their education policies, which are binding for all the Member States. Each EU Member State and its educational policy creates a set of instruments for legislative framework, institutional and organizational mechanisms, education services, education policy, programming documents, European cooperation and mobility programs, framework for research and technological development programs with European Social Fund implementation (Plavčan, 2001, p. 165).

1.1. Recent European Union documents

Comprehensive teaching and language learning in European background must be implemented in all education levels; it should be a part of lifelong learning process. The European dimension of education highlights the need for foreign languages skills, not only the general ones, but mainly related to the needs of employment and labor market. Abilities and skills to use foreign languages in a multicultural environment is an important factor of competitiveness. Foreign language knowledge increases the access and potential of employment, promotes mobility, but European labor market requires language skills that matches its demands for real

performance in it, so investment in communicational skills during foreign language learning and teaching will have direct reflection in socio-economic indicators of EU countries.

According to the European Commission and its working documents (European Review of Language Competencies) on the development and implementation of language learning, as well as based on its outputs, it is clear that the use of a foreign language with not sufficient knowledge is not adequate to apply on labor market. Coming from the methodology and language learning technologies for the first language and other foreign languages, the Member States set a goal towards active control of mother tongue and two other foreign languages in Europe in the White paper (European Commission, 1995, p.2). The current valid documents were analyzed and we verified their implementation and support in higher educational institutions in Slovakia, in the field of helping professions and social area and compared them with a sample in the Czech Republic.

1.2. Social area and communication

Everyday life requires effective communication in native and foreign languages. To communicate effectively means the ability to listen, write, understand, and speak, but important is to listen actively, listen to the others, show participation, show interest in communication between people. Insufficient communication and lack of acceptance can negatively influence the cognitive skills in all developmental periods of a human being existence and performance (Ručková & Sedalík, 2018, p. 94). Everyone has a need to be accepted, perceived, listened and heard by someone, with the possibility to react on the content.

To understand foreign language learning and teaching in this way, means to implement the approach for more effective communication, immersed in the lifelong learning that enriches teachers and students. Important is patience, effort, challenges and seeking of gradual steps towards gaining the effective communication skills (Varečková, 2017: 64).

Social workers or assistants in helping professions are like teachers of social competences, because they have to teach their clients how to cope with difficulties in their situations, teach them to act against life crises, and help them to understand themselves. To be a real educator means to be self-educated, knowledgeable, and as a good teacher they must be able to convey clear and understandable information within the given role, further also distinguished in the sub roles of coaches or trainers, the role of supervisors who participate in their further growth (Mátel & Schavel, 2015, p. 168-173). The job, profession, exercise itself is the continuation of initial systematic

education, applied also to the field of foreign language competencies, applied in the social sphere for communication with the newly spreading type of clients such as foreigners, migrants, children from mixed marriages, adopted children (their number in Slovak and Czech territory increases), thus increases the need to solve their immersed social problems, and communicate with them effectively often with foreign language implementation.

The needs of Slovakia and Czech Republic mean reflects the needs of culturally and linguistically mixed Europe, so the need for effective language using is becoming essential just for simpler, faster, more efficient and more proper and adequate communication with clients bound with all helping professions, social services (e.g. psychology, special and curative pedagogy, andragogy, social work, etc.) and with typologically changed clients: foreigners working and living in Slovakia or the Czech Republic, their partners, spouses, children from mixed marriages, children living with parents abroad, etc. Problems or limits that arise in communication may be caused by the mutual language barriers laid between social workers and clients. Findings from the social area and helping professions lead to general recommendations for education institutions and social policy creators, namely to design and implement gender inequality measures, achieve gender balance in social sphere, provide mobility opportunities, remove existing barriers, promote effective professional growth, carry out regular surveys, and clearly identify problems in the areas. Thus it is necessary to prepare social workers and specialists in helping professions for multilingual environment. The documents of European Union form the theoretical support give recommendations call for the need of language learning and teaching for practical purposes, for everyday life and work, where is seen only very slow implementation of adequate measures.

1.3. Languages for Jobs

The thematic expert group Languages for Jobs set by the European Commission in 2010, set recommendations as a part of open method for coordination between the Commission and the EU member states. The document issued in 2015 and called Languages for Jobs – Providing Multilingual Communications skills for the Labor Market sets the policy recommendations to reflect better match between the demand and supply of languages and communication skills on the European labor market, where the findings of the expert group have implications for wide range of actors, namely educational institutions, vocational training institutions, employers,

businesses, decision makers in national levels (European Commission, 2015, p. 5).

The report provides fourteen recommendations for action planning in individual Member States with proper addressing what to do why it important as well as the recommended realization steps is. The recommendations are summarized in Table of Recommendations in the document Languages for Jobs (European Commission, 2015, p. 36-39):

- **Improve the information flow about the language skill needs on the labor market.** Necessary is to perform regular surveys of trends and demands for languages in labor market, what should be further brought to educational institutions at different levels, to prepare and provide appropriate educational and training programs in the real life process.

- **Widen the supply of languages taught and learned in secondary education.** Important is to promote adequate methods of foreign language teaching, motivate learners to study, keep languages during the whole process of education, with support and collaboration of educational institutions, to reduce the gap between supply and demand.

- **Increase opportunities to continue language learning and training throughout education pathways, including in higher education.** All higher education institutions should widen and support language training with cross-curricular cooperation, with invested time and effort in language learning and its orientation at skills and their development, where language should become a complementary part of academic diploma.

- **Re-orient language teaching to develop targeted options and put language skills into context.** From initial vocational to tertiary education is important to orient language learning based on the future job, and utilize the language for specific purposes to cover the requirements of different occupations.

- **Develop specialized language training modules and methodology for teachers and trainers in VET.** Cooperation of language teachers and teachers and trainers of other and occupational subjects must be supported to promote and create in-service teacher training and develop proper language skills with teacher mobility support also outside the educational institutions.

- **Create best practice networking between training institutions.** Various categories of teaching and training institutions enhanced in language teaching bound with practical training and related skills are important for networking and facilitating the mobility of teachers

and learners. and supporting their ability to work in multilingual and multicultural area.

- **Increase learner mobility across the board.** Mobility must be strongly promoted, and the lack of language skills as an obstacle for mobility must be removed, via realization and strong support of making the languages an integral part of a strategy to make international mobility a reality through the partnerships promotion between the European authorities, business and educational institutions, with increased financial support for language teaching and learning as well as for mobility.

- **Encourage targeted language learning in the adult population.** Language learning with adult learners must find support in LLL system through the offer of vocationally oriented language supporting career changes, but also support vocationally oriented teaching to migrants.

- **Develop methods to test and assess language competences connected to specific professions or professional contexts.** Facilitate transparency and objective assessment through implemented diplomas and certificates of language competences based on CEFR, as a standardized requirement of employers, for proving the proof of language competences.

- **Validate informal language skills.** Recognize and validate language skills acquired through informal and non-formal learning, through developed Europass Language Passport, as an integral part of Europass with formalized dossier of documents.

- **Improve the structures for dialogue between education and the world of work.** Identify institutions and businesses to lead dialogue, and participate in continuous development of teaching syllabuses, together with further counselling and guidance of students in their educational pathway.

- **Improve the employer capacity to manage and exploit language skills.** Promote trade organization and employers to articulate correct needs for language skills and effective deployment of languages for specific purposes in the companies and the staff training.

- **Establish awards for companies to recognize outstanding multilingual performance.** On the national level introduce a business language label award, and encourage companies to manage language skills supplied by the educational sector.

- **Identify new financing models to secure provision of good language skills for labor market.** Support language skills education and its funding with involvement of public authorities and companies and prevent the permanent risk of severe cuts in language education round Europe.

Demand for communication skills rises widely, thus important are immediate steps and direct reflection in the system of education from basic up to professional levels, with language for specific purposes and CLIL method implementation, and matching the labor market needs. In practice, at universities and higher educational institutions, it means creation of balanced study programs, preparing future professionals in all areas for practice, where social and helping professions are included. Important is also the foreign language education involved in continuous professional development, continuous education through diversified lifelong learning formats.

2. Research

The aim of the research was to find out and verify the views of students and graduates of selected specialization (social area and helping professions), on the need for foreign language competences, support of language learning during study at universities in the form of language learning for specific purposes (as universities should implement the recommendations of the European Commission in practice), opinion of students and graduates on the need of foreign languages when applying for labor market. In Slovakia, we addressed the students and fresh graduates of the newly established study program Social Services and Counselling (where we expected implementation of European Union recommendations we compared them with the views of student, studying in the field of helping professions at a selected university in the Czech Republic (the similar study program does not exist in the Czech Republic).

3. Data Collection and Processing

The study uses a mixed quantitative and qualitative research with implemented questionnaire technique, supported by studied literature, legislation and internet sources.

The research sample created deliberately addressed respondents, students of last years of Bachelor and Master degree in daily and external form of study in the field of Social Services and Counselling at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, and its first graduates. For comparison were addressed the students of St Elisabeth University of Health and Social Work, branch in Příbram, Czech Republic, students of the last years of their study in the field of social work and helping professions (the same study program does not exist in the Czech Republic).

During data collection and processing we worked with the deliberately selected Slovak sample formed of 135 respondents (SR) and 81 respondents in the Czech sample (CR). The demographic description shows the majority of female respondents where in the Slovak sample they created 80.7 %, and in the Czech sample 90.12 %. The largest group in Slovakia was a group of 23-27 year olds, representing 61.5 % (83 respondents), what proves the age of the students completing their study, in the Czech sample prevailed 28+ year olds, representing 72.8 % (59 respondents), what corresponds with the age of external students with practical experience in the labor market. The prevalence of women in both groups proves the females interest working in social work and helping professions.

Before responds to the eleven-task questionnaire, the respondents evaluated their foreign language knowledge in accordance with CEFR descriptors. In both Slovak and Czech samples were mentioned only three languages: English, German and Russian, even the respondents could use also other foreign languages as we expected (i.e. Hungarian, or German but in higher of language knowledge). The Table 1. gives the more detailed description of language knowledge in our samples.

Table 1. Language knowledge

Amount of languages	Slovak sample (SR)	Czech sample (CZ)
One foreign language	36 (26.7 %)	24 (29.6 %)
Two foreign languages	73 (54.1 %)	37 (45.7 %)
Three foreign languages	24 (17.8 %)	20 (24.7 %)

Based on the gathered data was clearly seen the English language predominance in both samples, but the level of language knowledge ranged only from A1-B1 (beginner to moderate level), where we expected much higher levels, but it confirms the lack of systematic steps in language teaching and learning in both countries. To point out the need of mastering M+2, the mother tongue and two foreign languages, was for the first time published in the White Paper of 1995, but as proved by our research, no further system steps were done in proper foreign language acquisition in both countries.

The collected data of analyzed study materials from three universities in the Slovak Republic, where the modern new study program Social Services and Counseling is provided, showed that according to valid

accreditation process, the mentioned program is provided by: Faculty of Social Sciences and Health at the University of Constantin the Philosopher in Nitra, ISM International Business School Slovakia in Prešov and Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of St. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, but the findings show, that foreign language knowledge is not in none of the graduate's profiles, and the foreign languages courses have not been offered at any of them in a wider extent.

According to the University Portal of the Slovak Republic, the newly formed graduate profile of the study program 3.1.14 Social Work (valid from 21 February 2017), involves the foreign language as a specialized compulsory subject of the program, but the official profile of the study program 3.1.16 Social Services and Counseling has not existed yet. It is important to set the foreign language knowledge in the new graduate's profile of this program, respecting the recommendations of EC expert commissions, and provide language learning in specialized content during the whole course and in adequate way (recommendation – 5 semesters in Bachelor and 3 semesters in Master courses).

4. Interpretation of results

The questionnaire consisted of 11 questions identifying the need for foreign language education bound with the field of study (language for specific purposes - LSP), the opinion on the need acquiring foreign language in social area and helping professions, the usage of language competencies, interest in foreign language education during university courses, recent scope of foreign language education during university studies, the usage of foreign language resources for writing papers and theses, mobility, thoughts on introducing the comprehensive language learning matching the labor market requirements, and job oriented language knowledge.

In both countries 81.5 % respondents proved importance of foreign language education in the form of LSP, in the Slovak sample it was proved by 83.0 % respondents and in the Czech sample it was proved by 79.0 %, even some of them had no personal experience with this form of language learning. The results in both countries showed the importance of foreign language at work environment as follows: communication with clients (55.3 %), study of literature (34.2 %), paper work (5.3 %) and only 3.2 % of respondents expressed no need of foreign languages at work environment. From language competencies expected in the work environment prevailed communication (49.6 %) and listening (30.0 %). The interest in learning foreign languages in the form of LSP: 49.8 % of respondents were interested

in LSP, 31.5 % were not able to express themselves mainly due to the fact they had never experienced that type of foreign language education, no interest in LSP was expressed by 18.8 % of respondents. Important were also gathered facts on the length of recent language learning at universities: 36.9 % of respondents never had any language course at university, 9.7 % passed only 1 semester, 30.0 % of respondents passed two semesters, 12.0 % three semesters, 6.9 % had four semesters, 0.5 % had 5 semesters and 3.4 % had six-semester experience with foreign language learning at university. Concerning the usage of foreign language sources for their assignments, papers and theses mentioned as follows: 45.8 % used or will use them, 34.3 % mentioned no, and 19.9 % stated they do not know (Table 2).

Table 2. Length of foreign language education at universities gained from the respondents

Semesters	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Slovak Republic	17	21	63	21	11	1	1
%	12.6	15.6	46.7	15.6	8.1	0.7	0.7
Czech Republic							
%	63	0	2	5	4	0	8
	76.8	0.0	2.4	6.1	4.8	0.0	9.8

The problem question was mobility, where in both samples only 24 (11.1 %) respondents, travelled for mobility or for work abroad, what relates to the lack of language skills required for such a stay, study or work abroad.

Respondents in the Slovak Republic believe in the importance of foreign language learning in the form of LSP but in larger scope at universities, further they also believe in the importance and implementation of complex language education, and understanding language education as an inseparable part of life-long learning process, while in the Czech Republic prevailed a more sceptic view, what could be influenced by the lack of personal experience associated with learning the foreign languages in the field of study.

5. Conclusion and recommendations for practice

The demand for proper communication and foreign languages skills increases on the European labor market. Important is to create a complex system for teaching and learning foreign languages, supported by

governmental policy creators, educational institutions, businesses, in collaboration and development of real, complex, gradual system of language learning and teaching in all levels, as to gain proper multilingual skills requested on the European labor market. With the support of the European Commission's Expert Group, Languages for Jobs, it is necessary to support and disseminate new methods of teaching foreign languages oriented at students or learners, their properly set needs applicable in professional context. Based on the EC recommendations for languages employment, as well as based on the collected data, we express the following recommendations for practice:

- Foreign language education is based on levels and steps of education. Foreign languages as the means of communication removes barriers when used properly by social workers, consultants, supervisors with their clients, etc. (acceptance of changed typology of clients and changed environment).
- Find support for foreign language teaching and learning at universities but in proper scope, with proper LSP and utilized CLIL methods.
- Establish and set rules and concepts of foreign language teaching and learning from primary to higher educational institutions in both countries, implement language learning as pro-prolonged continuation of previous education bound with labor market requirements.
- Use the foreign language as part of graduates' expertise, motivate and promote mobility abroad, motivate students to use foreign language resources for assignments and papers, or to write thesis in foreign languages.
- Create a concept of lifelong language learning, with wide range of institutions and employers involved, develop and create modules for further language learning aimed at professionals working in different areas, social services, counseling and helping professions included.

To sum up, learning and teaching foreign languages for specific purposes is becoming the necessity in both countries. Necessary is to prepare, develop and implement system steps, backed by regulations and laws, with acceptance and extensive support of governments, educational institutions, employers, etc. to meet the requirements of recent and future labor market needs and thus prepare students for jobs also during their university study with proper implementation of foreign languages.

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