

The importance of multilingualism for business: the UK experience

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Multilingualism is becoming more and more common in Europe, but we are still confronted with these facts:

(a) lack of information. People in many different sectors of society do not have even basic information on how languages are learned at different ages across the lifespan. As a result, there are still many misconceptions about child and adult multilingualism, some of which are very old and some arise out of misunderstandings of recent research.

(b) Language learning for many people means English learning. There is an almost exclusive focus on English in many European countries. In countries such as the UK, on the other hand, language learning has low priority because of its state of 'privileged monolingualism' in English.

The UK is an emblematic case of monolingualism. Not only does this country have the worst language skills of all 28 countries in the EU, but there has been a further decline in language learning despite the evidence of a demand for language skills (Source: Mann, A., Brassell, M. & Bevan, D. (2011). *The economic case for language learning and the role of employer engagement*. London: Education and Employers Taskforce for CfBT Education Trust.

Investment in language learning is still being seen in the UK at best as 'nice to have' rather than a priority that directly supports growth. People with language skills in business are usually seen as language specialists and evaluated on their ability to translate or interpret, not on their business skills. This under-appreciation of language skills has serious consequences for the private sector: *"Two thirds of businesses in the UK cite foreign language as a barrier and eight out of ten feel challenged by differences in culture and etiquette"* (Source: HSBC (2008) *Business without Boundaries*. London).

The lack of investment in language learning is a very costly barrier to trade, which can be represented as equivalent to tax. This 'tax' in 2011 equated to 0.5% GDP: so it costs GBP 48 billion to the UK economy (sources: Foreman-Peck, J. and Wang, L. (2013) "Costs to the UK of language deficiencies as a barrier to UK engagement in exporting: A report to UK trade & investment". Cardiff University; Scottish Government (2012) "A rapid review of the evidence of impact on Scottish Businesses of a monolingual workforce"; CfBT Education and Employers Taskforce (2011) "The economic case of language learning and the role of employer engagement").

Given this bleak scenario, what can be done to move away from privileged monolingualism towards a situation of empowering multilingualism? Research

can provide some useful pointers, some of which are more obvious than others. Perhaps the most obvious reason to foster language skills is that they enhance international trade and competitiveness in a global market. But research on multilingualism suggests, much less obviously, that multilinguals may be simply better at doing business. In order to appreciate this point, it is useful to briefly consider the many misconceptions that still exist about early bilingualism in children and late bilingualism in adults.

The prejudices about child bilingualism are still quite persistent. Many people believe that being exposed to two languages in early childhood may bring confusion and developmental delays; and later to poor results at school due to imperfect command of the language of schooling. Bilingualism may be encouraged when it involves a language with instrumental utility (English is the clearest example) but is definitely discouraged when it involves less widely spoken or less prestigious languages.

The most common myth about adult language learning is that once childhood is over, it is impossible to learn another language well enough: adult learners can therefore learn only through laborious study of grammar rules and regular error correction, in order to overcome the persistent influence of their native language on the second language.

Research on multilingualism provides ample evidence that these are false myths.

For child bilingualism, it clearly shows that even very young bilingual infants can perceptually separate their two languages. There is also evidence of specific beneficial effects of bilingualism on a range of linguistic and mental abilities. For example, bilingual children have been shown to have a spontaneous understanding of how language works in general, and therefore better language learning skills. Language mixing, far from being a marker of confusion, demonstrates creativity and grammatical competence in both languages. Handling two languages from an early age brings about an earlier awareness of other people's perspectives and points of view, as well as a more effective control of attention and an enhanced ability to handle conflicting information in everyday tasks.

Research on adult bilingualism also contradicts the existing misconceptions in more than one way. For one thing, many adults can reach excellent proficiency in a second language, and some even attain native-like levels in most respects. Adults who reach a good command of a second language gain implicit knowledge, which cannot be imparted on basis of conscious study of rules and correction. Furthermore, it seems that learning a second language changes the native language in subtle ways, and these changes may be integral to success in language learning. Finally, some recent studies suggest that languages can be learned even by older adults, and multilingualism may be a 'cognitive reserve' that delays some types of normal and pathological decline of cognitive functions in ageing.

To sum up, research on the linguistic and cognitive aspects of bilingualism suggests that knowledge of more than one language is a lifetime investment with beneficial consequences for the brain. But what are the specific advantages of

multilingualism for business? Four types of advantage can be considered: (a) decision making, (b) negotiating, (c) prioritising, and (d) adopting the perspective of other people.

First, recent research indicates that second language speakers may be better than native speakers at making rational decisions and controlling heuristic biases that are based on emotional reactions. This can be an advantage in negotiations that depend on a dispassionate evaluation of different factors.

Second, multilingualism may confer more effective 'soft power' in business and diplomatic interactions. Soft power involves *"Persuading others through attraction, rather than coercion or payment"* (Nye 1999). This skill can be a crucial in order to build and maintain trust and goodwill in stakeholders.

Third, multilinguals are potentially better at evaluating and prioritizing arguments, and this in turn strengthens the ability to cooperate, negotiate, and compromise. In Joseph Nye's words: *"... technological advances have led to... an explosion of information, and that has produced a "paradox of plenty.... Attention rather than information becomes the scarce resource, and those who can distinguish valuable information from background clutter gain power"*.

Fourth, multilingualism may bring an enhanced ability to 'put oneself into other people's shoes' and to evaluate both the background to the interlocutor's statements and the potential impressions of one's statements on the interlocutor. Philip Tetlock says: *"... a great deal of effort in soft power goes into managing others' impressions. Bilingual and bicultural individuals become quite good at determining which responses will fit with the expectations of others"*. (Briley et al. 2005. Cultural chameleons: biculturals, conformity motives, and decision making. *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 15: 351-362)

If this is the case, it follows that being a native English speaker in a business negotiation is not necessarily an advantage. Richard Rose puts it: *"Knowledge of EFL does not confer soft power on Anglophones but on Europeans using it in interactions with monoglot American and English speakers"*.

These considerations can only strengthen the following conclusion: *"Employers who can communicate in two or more languages – combined with an understanding of local cultures – can make all the difference in the conduct of business, consolidating relationships with existing suppliers and customers and opening the way to new contracts"*. (source: CBI (2011). Making the UK the best place to invest. London: Confederation of Business and Industry).

Given its potential benefits for business, the private sector could develop corporate social responsibility towards multilingualism in a variety of ways, for example by hiring more multilingual employees; by training language skills in the workforce; by championing policies aimed at making early bilingualism possible; by sponsoring initiatives/institutions that encourage child and adult bilingualism; and by actively supporting the workforce in their efforts to raise bilingual children. Moreover, companies that send their executives abroad should be aware of the benefits of sending children to local schools and learn the

local language, rather than just remaining within the boundaries of established expatriate circles.

A source of further information in the UK and in Europe is *Bilingualism Matters* (<http://www.bilingualism-matters.ppls.ed.ac.uk>), a Centre of Excellence at the University of Edinburgh that aims to provide research-based information about multilingualism and language learning to different sectors of society. Besides the business sector, it operates in four areas of engagement:

- Language learning exposure in the preschool and primary school years
- Maintenance of home languages in immigrant children
- Maintenance of regional minority languages
- Language learning over the lifespan

Bilingualism Matters has a large international network of 14 branches in Europe, including in Norway, and now two in the United States.