

## ***Mobility, growth and jobs The multilingual challenge of the Single Market***

Policy Dialogue – 5 December 2012

### **Summary**

The EU's multilingual nature can be an asset for European companies, giving them the tools they need to harness multilingualism as a means of accessing multicultural global markets and gaining a competitive advantage over their US counterparts, heard participants in this Policy Dialogue, jointly organised by the EPC and the European Academy of Yuste Foundation.

### **Full Report**

"Foreign languages are very important in the business world and for the Single European Market. China looks to Europe and appreciates its linguistic and cultural diversity. The Chinese share the idea that languages are important," said **Uwe Mohr**, director of **Poliglotti4.eu**, a European Commission-funded project to foster and promote multilingualism in the EU.

By way of example, Mohr claimed that many Flemish people did not trust Belgian Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo – a Francophone – because his Dutch was too simplistic for him to be able to express himself properly when speaking the language.

"English is important, but it's not enough for Europe. English is almost a lingua franca, to be used as a tool. As a tool it's good, but not good enough. Business and personal relations need more than that," said Mohr, who is also president of the EU Civil Society Platform for Multilingualism.

"If you don't use your foreign languages, you may forget them. It's not enough for them to be on school curricula. You need lifelong learning, and lifelong opportunities to use them," he warned.

He said there was still room for improvement regarding the foreign language skills of European hospital and police workers, for example.

"Many Europeans still haven't fully learned one foreign language, never mind a second," he said.

Mohr described language learning as a good investment in Europe's future, and hailed its job market potential. In these times of economic difficulty, some people were leaving their home countries to find jobs elsewhere: for example in Germany – learning German along the way.

"Languages are a tool for interacting and an essential part of the European integration process," Mohr said.

"Many years ago I founded Trados. I brought it from Europe to the US in order to conquer the US market," said **Jochen Hummel**, Chairman of **LT-Innovate** (a European language technology innovation forum) and **CEO of ESTeam AB**.

“I was struck by the huge potential of the US market,” said Hummel, explaining that the size of the US market meant that companies still had huge growth potential even without expanding abroad.

“In the EU, it’s different. You’re forced to go abroad much earlier in order to grow. It’s hard, and companies are afraid,” he said, citing language, cultural and administrative barriers among their greatest fears. “By the time they’re prepared to move, a big US competitor may have already got there,” he warned.

He complained that although capital could flow freely between EU countries, the same could not be said of information, citing as an example the difficulties of cross-border e-government.

One good example, Hummel said, is the European Patent Office’s harmonisation of trademark terms across all EU languages, which reduces the time it takes to file a trademark to a matter of weeks, with huge benefits to the business community.

“It’s not necessarily a translation problem. It’s a problem of processing multilingual information. The control of information and content has changed, shifting from companies to users and from governments to citizens,” he argued.

Today’s content is open source and is created by people in their own language, said Hummel, citing the example of online product reviews or help pages.

“Companies are trying to monitor what’s being written about them online. This data is multilingual, and companies that mine it can gain competitive advantages,” Hummel argued.

“Languages aren’t disappearing, but there are no tools to process them. We only have the tools to process English,” he said, arguing that using technology to translate websites from Chinese really works well only into English.

“Some infrastructure must be built by governments. We need a European language infrastructure or cloud in which all European languages are treated equally and with the same quality,” said Hummel, arguing that it would take companies too long to develop and get returns from such an endeavour.

“All the basic tools that do marvellous things for the English-speaking world must exist in other EU languages too,” he insisted.

He concluded by arguing that overcoming the handicap of the EU’s multilingual nature can turn it into an asset for European companies, giving them the tools they need to harness multilingualism as a means of accessing multicultural global markets and gaining a competitive advantage over their US counterparts.

Multilingualism isn’t just a question of education. At EU level, the message or paradigm of education is changing. It used to be about understanding cultural diversity, but nowadays education systems are about preparing young people for the labour market, said **Pierre Mairesse**, Director for Lifelong Learning horizontal policy and 2020 Strategy at **DG Education and Culture** in the **European Commission**.

The same is happening regarding foreign languages, said Mairesse, arguing that language skills were now seen as crucial to Europeans’ future job prospects. “The message is filtering down to member-state level too,” he insisted.

Stressing the need to spread the message that foreign language teaching in Europe simply isn't good enough, he said "the quality of learning outcomes varies widely between European education systems. It's not for the Commission to decide which languages are taught, and we must recognise that English is becoming a basic tool".

The Commission official emphasised the importance of 'the mother tongue + 2' concept of learning two foreign languages in addition to your mother tongue, whether those foreign languages are other EU ones or not.

Mother tongue + 2 invites member states to rethink their language teaching curricula, Mairesse explained, for example, by having children start to learn foreign languages at an earlier age, by increasing the number of teaching hours, or by increasing the number of languages available.

"Rethink quality parameters and harness the potential of new technology to provide new ways of learning and teaching languages. Our often rather conservative education systems must harness these new approaches," the Commission official argued.

"We must monitor progress," said Mairesse, arguing that it was easy to stress the importance of language learning, but that collecting a body of evidence would make it easier to monitor the situation.

EU benchmarks for language learning would be a good long-term tool to improve things, he said, proposing a target of at least 50% of the EU population being independent users of their first foreign language.

## Discussion

Responding to suggestions that the speakers were proposing more government spending on language learning at a time of austerity-induced cuts to public service budgets all over Europe, **Poliglotti4.eu project director Uwe Mohr** warned that it would be a mistake for governments, businesses and individuals to slash spending on language education and training.

"Language learning requires patience, which no-one has in the modern world. Language learning isn't an artificial thing. Machines help, but it's also about cultural diversity, openness and tolerance of other cultures, which brings business advantages too," Mohr argued.

He said that language wasn't just a communication tool but was also about identity.

Asked whether other languages were even necessary given the establishment of English as a lingua franca – and responding to claims that it was possible to live in Brussels while using only English – **Jochen Hummel**, Chairman of **LT-Innovate** (a European language technology innovation forum) and **CEO of ESTeam AB**, said "homogenous markets allow companies to grow very quickly, giving US companies an advantage over European ones. But with the right technology, we can turn Europe's multilingualism into an asset".

Hummel explained that after having already expanded across Europe, EU companies would need to go global in order to continue to grow. "There we can outperform our US competitors," he argued.

It's true that many European businesses – and much business financing for start-ups – is surprisingly national. But businesses structured in a multicultural manner will hopefully be the global champions of the future, Hummel said.

Asked whether it was the EU's Erasmus programme itself or the act of doing a placement abroad in general that did so much to bring Europeans closer together and encourage language learning, **European Commission official Pierre Mairesse** said "we've proposed Erasmus for all, not just to increase the number of students and boost Erasmus-like mobility, but to increase the number of placements of this kind". He cited as possible examples apprenticeships to boost employability, mobility and language learning.

"Unemployment is a big problem, so we want to promote mobility as work-based learning financed by the Structural Funds," Mairesse explained. He warned that labour mobility was still very low in the EU and would have to be increased dramatically.

"The key challenge is to motivate young people to learn a second foreign language, because the case for the first one [which is usually English] is well understood. Companies must spread the message that they need people who speak not just English, but other languages too," said Mairesse, expressing his conviction that education would remain high on the list of priorities for spending under the next EU budget.

"Erasmus is one of the best things we have in Europe. It has done a lot to foster European identity and promote mobility. It's not just about economic power – it's also about cultural experiences. That's why they all want to go to Barcelona!" said **Uwe Mohr**.

Stressing the importance of lifelong language learning, Mohr urged would-be language learners not to be perfectionists. "You don't need to be able to speak the language perfectly," he said.

"Erasmus is great, but let's move around young businesspeople and politicians too, rather than just students – especially in border regions, to raise awareness of the other country," Mohr said.

Make language learning easy, flexible and entertaining, not just something difficult to sit through at school, he advised.