LEARNING OR ACQUIRING?
FOREIGN LANGUAGE/ENGLISH LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE OF HUNGARIAN EMPLOYEES IN IRELAND

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Abstract

It is a widely known fact that preference is for those employees who speak at least one foreign language. It is worth spending one or two years in a native speaking country to practise our skills. A never answered question: what is a minimum of language knowledge which is needed to start a new life in a foreign country? I made a survey among the Hungarian employees working in Ireland to find out how much they had been able to speak English before they arrived in Ireland.

Keywords: English, foreign language, Hungarian, Ireland, employment

1. Introduction

Reading the statements of international and national chief executives, managers it is more and more evident that in the labour market it is an advantage if the employee spend at least a year abroad. It is worth to work one or two years abroad and to take the challenge to live in a different cultural and language environment. This experience can be beneficial later in the Hungarian labour market.

The knowledge of one or two foreign languages is a must for all the European citizens who would like to seek their fortune in another country. The Hungarian know it as well, however as for the data of Eurobarometer (2006) 58% of the population is not able to communicate in any other languages but Hungarian (only 3 nations have worse results - Ireland, The United Kingdom and Italy).[1]

As for the various survey data most of the Hungarian employees settle down in the United Kingdom and in Ireland. Both in Ireland and in the UK Hungarian employees are much sought.

It is not possible to find proper information about the exact number of Hungarian employees in Ireland. „In the first 12 months following the join of the new member states 83 thousand, then between May 2005 and October 2005 another 66 thousand PPSN (Personal Public Service Number) were issued to the citizens of the 10 new member states. The Ministry of Labour believes that the one third of the immigrant employees stay permanently, it is about 50 thousand people. The number of the Hungarian is about 2-3%, 3-5000 registered and 1-2000 employees. The Irish government believes the foreign employees are necessary for the economic development."[2]

Cork city is a popular destination of the Hungarian as the working opportunities are very good. It is still true that in the hospitality sector and in the building industry the employees are mostly from abroad. They are the ones who are happy with the working conditions and flexible enough to start a career in these economic sectors.

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As the possibilities of the immigrants are limited it is a widely known fact that English language is a mediator among the non-native English speakers.[3]

This essay shows the results of a survey that I made about the English language knowledge and English language use of Hungarian employees living in Cork City. I tried to focus on the main areas: I wanted to know who much they had been able to speak English before they arrived in Ireland and if they were able to jump on the rank scale thanks for their developing English.

2. Language knowledge of the Hungarian

As for the statistic data in the primer 15 member states 45/100 people are possible to communication in another language but their native. This rate is much lower in the ex-socialist countries. A 1996 EU survey mentions Hungary as a negative example where the rate is the lowest in the region. Although neither the Czech Republic nor Poland had much better result the number of people speaking English or German was double than in Hungary.[4]

The survey of Eurobarometer March 2002 reports that among the 10 new member states Slovenia is number one in the line as for the foreign language knowledge of the citizens. 71% of our South-West neighbours can speak at least one of the 5 Western languages (English, German, Italian, Spanish, or French). 45% of the Czech, 36% of the Estonian, 33% of the Polish, 30% of the Lithuanians and 29% of the Slovakian and the Romanian claimed the same. IN the primer 15 states the rate is 53%, in Hungary it is 19%. About one fourth of the young Hungarians speak foreign languages.[5]

2002 survey data of Gallup show that Hungary with 25% is 11th of 13 countries tested about the knowledge of English, German or French among citizens. In Poland the rate is 33%.[6]

On the whole we could make a not so good conclusion: according to the various survey data the Hungarian have been the last in line in foreign language knowledge of the European citizens recently. There are many cultural, social, educational and economical reasons that try to explain the shameful results. Not to focus only on the negative aspects we must emphasise the developing tendencies in the English language knowledge of the young. For the last 15 years the rate more than doubled. In the 90s' around 12% was the rate of foreign language speakers in Hungary, in 2001 it was 19, 2% and in 2005 it reached 29%.[7]

To find the real reasons of the current state is not easy. Possibly the main reason is that we started too late. The initiatives to reform language teaching were present at the transformation of the system in 1989. Basically it was the time when the spread of the Western languages started in Hungary. Despite the fact that sometimes there were not even qualified language teachers, from 1998 the language learning became compulsory even in vocational schools is 9-10th grade. From 2003 secondary schools are allowed to start language preparatory years, when students can reach a high level of foreign language

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knowledge. At the Millennium, just like in many other European countries, English became the leading foreign language to be taught in Hungary.[8]

Specialists claim that the late leaving certificate reform and the language specialities of the Hungarian language are the main reasons why we speak languages the least in Europe. We have our programmes to fall into line with the other countries but we have to wait for the results. The lack of foreign language knowledge is a disadvantage in any abroad travel especially in case of a permanent stay, like starting a career. The success of our neighbour countries can be caused by the earlier introduction of the new leaving certificate system.[9]

In 2003 the so called "Világ-Nyelv Program" (World-Language Programme) started as a part of a new, complex, foreign language- developing strategy. Its aim is that every student, by the time of leaving school should be able to speak at least one language on B2 level and another one on A2.[10] The programme yearly supports the various levels of language teaching with tenders. (2009 is the 7th year of tenders). Hopefully with the help of these tenders in couple of years more and more young people will have the possibility to learn foreign languages.

3. Foreign language learning in school system

The basic scene of foreign language learning is the school. EU citizens have learnt foreign languages in primary school (24%), secondary school (59%) or vocational school (17%). In Hungary these rates are the following: 34%, 45%, and 8%.

From the 1980s' the interest of the parents has been raised towards the possibilities of foreign language knowledge. They required that at least one Western language must be thought in the compulsory education.

In the first stage of language teaching changes happened the language change itself, and as a result, by 1992/93 975 thousand students had learnt a Western language and only 200 thousand learnt Russian. In 1989 it was the other way, 928 thousand learnt Russian and only 275 thousand learnt a Western language. In the second stage significant horizontal and vertical expansion happened: more and more students learnt foreign language from a certain age group, in more weekly number of hours, among less students in one group with a greater variety of possibly chosen languages.

In the secondary schools – mainly in grammar schools – one of the main aims of students has been to pass successfully, at least one, B2 level state language exam (to get language exam complement, to fulfil the requirements of employers, to get extra points with the university entrance exams).[11]

Monitoring the period of language learning we can see that the higher the quality of education is the longer the period of language learning is. Almost 2/3 of the grammar school students start a foreign language by the time they enter the 11th grade, while this rate is 50% in secondary and 38% in vocational education (2006 survey).

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1. Chart: *The distribution of students in different scene of education concerning their language learning period in their 1-8th grade, 1995/96–2002/03 (%)*[12]

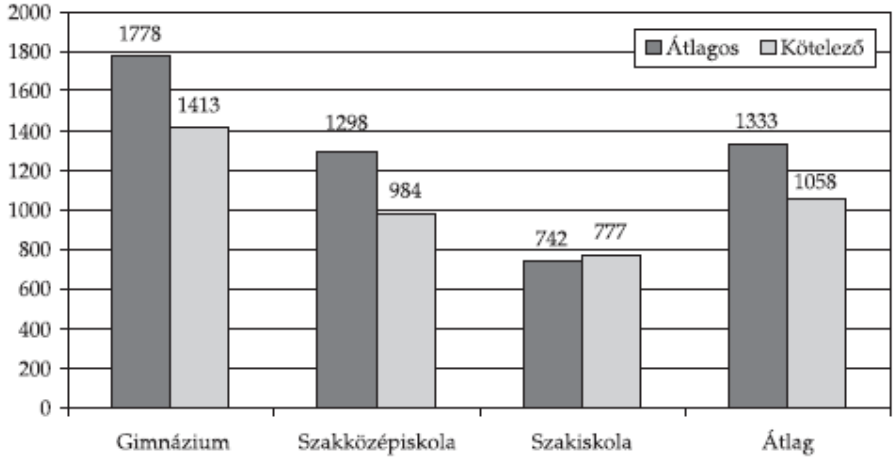
Scene of education	How many years they learnt languages in the 1-8. grade %				
	0	1-3 years	4-5 years	6-8 years	Sum
Grammar school	0,8	2,3	34,0	62,9	100,0
Technical school	1,3	2,9	42,4	53,4	100,0
Vocational	7,0	7,3	48,1	37,6	100,0
Sum	2,4	3,7	40,7	53,1	100,0

The second chart shows that the popularity of English language grows with the grades. In case of the technical schools the rate of English and German seems equal, only in the junior section German is more popular.

2. Chart: *The rate of the two most popular languages among the students in 1-9 grade, 1995/96–2003/04 (%)*[13]

Grade	Grammar		Technical		Vocational	
	English	German	English	German	English	German
1.	18,7	17,0	13,0	15,2	7,2	12,0
2.	24,2	20,8	17,3	19,2	9,6	15,1
3.	36,1	29,3	26,8	28,2	15,5	24,7
4.	52,2	41,9	45,0	45,0	31,3	46,7
5.	56,9	44,2	49,6	48,2	35,4	51,4
6.	57,4	44,3	50,0	48,3	35,5	51,3
7.	59,2	44,7	50,6	48,4	35,7	51,2
8.	59,9	45,2	50,7	48,4	35,8	50,4
9.	90,2	68,9	58,2	41,3	35,0	55,5

1. Graph: *The average (dark) and the compulsory (light)number of all second and third languages 1-12 grades, all kind of secondary schools (Grammar, Technical, Vocational) 1995/96–2006/07*[14]



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During 12 years in public education 30% of the students learn foreign languages in lower number of lessons than compulsory while 60% learn them in a higher lesson number. An average 1222 number of lessons would be enough to fulfil the requirements of the EU, to have threshold level foreign language knowledge in two other but native languages.

4. Participants and method of the survey

The survey is based on personal interviews; therefore my aim was not a statistically representative one. My 15 participant can not stand for the whole of the Hungarian employees. Basically I tried to find the connection between the level of English language knowledge and the career they made. The members of the group are native Hungarians, age 20-40 who have lived and worked for 1-5 years in County Cork, Ireland. They work in different positions in different work places.

5. The aim of the survey

The aim of my non representative survey is to get answer to two very important questions with the help of a questionnaire. I wanted to know if it is possible to start a life in Ireland without any English knowledge and if it had been possible to jump on the rank scale with continuously developing English.

My hypotheses:

1. At least A2 level English is needed to start a career in Ireland.
2. With the help of better foreign language knowledge someone can enter a higher position. That is my "Better English- Better Job" hypothesis.

6. Results

The participants have lived in Ireland for 2 years on the average. 2 of them had lived in a native English speaking country before and 3 of them in other countries (Austria, Germany, Israel). There is only one person who did not have any English knowledge when he arrived in Cork. The other 14 people were on different levels in English and had different documents to prove their knowledge: secondary school leaving certificate, language school diplomas, A"2, B2, C1 level state language exams. They were not certain about their actual knowledge as some of them passed the exams 10-15 years ago and had not used it actively since then. 10 participants are able to communicate in a 3rd language (German, Spanish, Italian, French or Russian).

The next questions were in connection with their success of English at work. All of them agreed that at least A2 level of English is needed to the everyday communication and to get job. About 2 months were needed for them to learn the special terminology of their working environment and use it without mistakes. They mentioned the lack of grammatical awareness as their main defect. Although it is not a disadvantage as none of them is in a situation where official, prober written English is a must. Emphasis is on spoken communication, their vocabulary expands while their grammar many cases

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declines. Only the one who arrived without any English knowledge took part in English course in Ireland. After he had arrived he took a course of English, 20 hours weekly. When he finished the course, he spoke and wrote on A2 level.

My next question was the chore of my survey. I wanted to know if they had been able to achieve a higher position thanks for their developing English. The answers were not obvious. None of them thought that they achieved a better position primarily because of their better English. Although as an English teacher myself I have a different opinion about it. It is evident that they had to spoke in English, convince their future employers and show their professional knowledge in a language that is not their native. It is only possible because they improved their professional knowledge in English, in a native country.

That was the time one my other hypothesis appeared. It is not easy to make a deduction. I only had one participant arriving without English but he only started a career when he had already taken an English language course. Very interesting that he made the biggest career, started as a fish stall assistant at the market and finished as assistant bar manager by a 4 star hotel.

My last question was in connection with their future language learning aims. Only 2 languages were mentioned: German, as they want to move closer to Hungary (Germany, Austria); Spanish because of the rough weather conditions they want to spend at least the summer season in Spain, the Canary or the Balearic Islands.

7. Deductions

As the survey is not representative we cannot make proper deductions. I have already implied that I was not able to prove my hypotheses. However I could analyze the answers and make my deductions. None of the participants answered that their developing English helped them to find a better job but their expanded vocabulary, motivation and self-confidence (so which blocked the appearance of Krashen's affective filter15) were crucial conditions of a successful interview even if they are on different opinion. As a result of this survey and my own Irish experience, I stand that previous English knowledge is a must to enter Ireland, fit into another culture, another linguistic environment and to start career.

8. Conclusion

The essay is based on a survey focusing of the standards and effectiveness of foreign language (mainly English language) teaching in Hungary. I wanted to see which is more effective- learning a language in Hungary or acquire it in a native country. My further aim is to widen the number and nationality of the participants with asking other immigrants in Ireland. With this I will be able to compare the situation of English teaching in other Central-, Eastern European countries.

Unfortunately the situation in Hungary is not satisfactory but developing tendencies are shown. It is our choice if we make the best of it.

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