Does English take priority in a multilingual Europe?

Camelia FIRICĂ, Jean FIRICĂ

Universitatea "Spiru Haret" din Craiova, Facultatea de Management Financiar Contabil
Universitatea din Craiova, Facultatea de Educație Fizică și Sport
"Spiru Haret" University of Craiova, Faculty of Financial Accounting Management
University of Craiova, Faculty of Physical Education and Sport
Personal e-mails: cameliafirica56@gmail.com, firicajean@yahoo.com

Does English take priority in a multilingual Europe?

Incentives deriving from the attractive career prospects that arise from the rights which ever more citizens have acquired following the European Union enlargement through the accession of new member states, part of which managed to shake off the yoke of the communist Eastern bloc, called forth an increase in the mobility of the European population.

For most of these people, Romanians being among them, who chose to make their way in countries whose language they did not speak, English was not just a means of communication but also the only tool that, to a greater or lesser extent, helped them become familiar with the vernacular languages.

The opening of new horizons prompted Romanians to engage in foreign language study from a very early age, English being favoured. In is turn this language came towards people by the unprecedented global economic and technologic developments. Multilingualism became one of the European Union's language policy objectives.

The paper tackles, on one hand, the problem of multilingualism in the present European context and of the importance English holds in the process of teaching other languages - Romanian especially in the Romanian language departments abroad.

Key words: multilingualism, globalisation, foreign language, English, Romanian.

Introduction

Mankind faced, in the course of time, such historical phenomena like imperialism, colonialism, migration - determined by poor economic development, religious or political convictions, educational reasons - scientific or technological advance which brought about communication increase and establishment of human relationships worldwide. All these developments resulted in multilingualism referred basically as the fundamental ability of communicating in more than two languages.[1]

Considering the huge number of languages, language varieties and dialects spoken throughout the world, multilingualism is a very common phenomenon, the use of several languages having always been a distinctive feature of societies seeking contact with one another. In former times, trade, cultural and scientific contacts and exchanges would have hardly been possible without a modicum of multilingual practices[2]. Today "multilingualism, in the sense of an individual or an institution operating effectively in more than one language, is an everyday reality for the majority of the world's inhabitants. It is a source of richness and joy for us, facilitating access to a range of cultures and cosmologies".[3]

During the few last decades, when the awareness of multilingualism and research in this field have become increasingly conspicuous Europe endeavoured to embrace diversity as well, particularly the linguistic one; in its vision, diversity and multilingualism are - in this globalized environment - elements of competitiveness. For this reason, the necessity that European citizens should master, beside their mother tongue, two more European languages, counts among the European Union language policy objectives. "It is the multilingual competencies of citizens, the embracing of varied communicative skills and abilities which serve as the most appropriate means of engaging with the new challenges facing Europe's

BDD-A26130 © 2016 Centrul Cultural Interetnic Transilvania
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.87 (2026-11-09 02:05:59 UTC)

linguistically and culturally complex societies."[4]

The European Union treaties that set out the legal basis for multilingualism entrust the Union the task to support and complement member states' actions meant to develop the European dimension in education, mainly through the teaching and dissemination of every state's language, with full respect for the linguistic and cultural diversity and prohibiting discrimination on linguistic grounds. In a European Union with 27 member states, 23 official languages, 60 minority languages - minorities, which have always inhabited sundry countries, greatly increased the European Union's linguistic complexity[5] - and the languages of immigrant communities added, linguistic diversity is a fact of life.

Nevertheless, in a world where globalization[6] is reality noticeable at all levels, the linguistic one included, Europe is also facing an extensive use of English, which impacted globally in a unique way[7] upon all fields from spots to high technology. It thus became a global language whose communication potential made people decide to learn or use it[8] because they were convinced English, more than any other language, would help them establish contacts.[9]

Favorable circumstances for multilingualism in Romania

In Romania, even prior to the fall of communism proficiency in as many languages represented a token of social prestige[10]; consequently the study of two foreign languages was mandatory and pupils, whether living in cities or villages, had equal chances and opportunities to develop both active and passive foreign language skills and obtain multilingual school-leaving qualifications[11]. Since the early 1970s, through a varied offer stipulated in national curricula, the study of foreign languages was supported formally from the age of 8 (the second grade) for the former language and from the age of 12 (the sixth grade) for the latter. Pupils could opt for a fairly wide range from Russian - that prevailed until 1989 not in the sense of being favoured by learners but rather imposed by the existing political system - to French English, German, Spanish. This wide offer was valid and applied, as a rule, to major cities and prestigious or elitist educational institutions while schools in rural areas experienced a poorer one - here Russian and French were prevalent. Thus, students committed to study had great chances to leave school with sound knowledge of two foreign languages. Universities gave them the opportunity to deepen this study because syllabi used to include the study of foreign languages for two more years. Very often students could opt for a completely new language to them - not studied in school - so at the end of a complete cycle of study they were able to speak three foreign languages.

With the change of the political regime, English gained priority in the preferences of the education system beneficiaries displacing other languages[12], French for instance, which used to be favoured, on one hand, due to the admiration for a culture with which Romanians had developed and maintained long-term bilateral relations and, on the other hand, because they resented Russian and the gloomy past[13]. By special request from parents - in the name of the hard-earned democracy people began to claim everything they longed for while under a totalitarian regime - children started to study English as early as nursery school and the situation has continued to the present day. In the spirit of concern for the study of foreign languages, manifested by both Romanian officials and pupils and families, between 1996 - 2005 curricula stipulated several languages (English, French, German, Russian, Spanish, Italian, Greek, Japanese, Portuguese, Norwegian) that were to be studied at the primary or secondary school level, either as a first or second foreign language.[14] At present, even if the offer was completed with Chinese or Arabic, preference for English still prevails.[15] The crucial change in the development of language acquisition over the last 24 years has merely been that knowledge of English has grown considerably among younger people.[16] This may be explained by the spread of English language use globally (not to mention that in the European Union English is the most widely spoken language) in politics, economy, academic life, science and technique which knew unrivalled achievements in English speaking countries. New notions and ideas in several fields had to be employed and named in English as long as languages lacked words to name them.

As we stated above, the Romanian educational system has always given pupils the possibility to acquire two foreign languages so much the more at present when this is one of the objectives of the European policy in education stated in the European Commission's White Paper on *Teaching and Learning. Towards the Learning Society* (1995) and in the action plan *Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan* (2003). Nonetheless referring to that period we can assert that French, English and German were signs of elite multilingualism and the so called elite multilingual speakers[17] would acquire foreign language knowledge both in an institutional context and with the help of private tutors.

All these were preparatory steps for a higher level of education - university - where English has lately become a tool that smoothed the students' access to either academic communities abroad[18] which, in their attempt to draw more students, internationalized by introducing international degree programmes, with English as the sole medium of instruction,[19] or to the Romanian institutions[20] which also introduced courses taught in English as well as in German, French and Hungarian. The measure attracted foreign students as well for whom the Ministry of Education has special programs to support the study of the Romanian language.

Nevertheless, two remarks must be made: on one hand, the distribution of competence in foreign languages

BDD-A26130 © 2016 Centrul Cultural Interetnic Transilvania
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.87 (2026-11-09 02:05:59 UTC)

studied at different levels of education is rather erratic[21] among young people and, on the other hand, the number of young people, irrespective of social status and levels of education that lack the ability to use foreign languages actively and functionally[22] is ever greater despite the national educational policy that encouraged and still does the acquisition of two foreign languages by all school graduates who compulsorily receive foreign language training. It seems that the fact that employers require employees to be fluent in two European languages, one of which English, is a prerequisite, does not weigh very much in the determination to become relevant to employment[23] by such skills.

Promotion of the Romanian language, an attribute of multilingualism

According to studies, countries that are champions in the internationalization of higher education, English, German and French speaking countries such as SUA, UK, Australia, Canada, Germany, Austria, France, Belgium - met an important condition, the promotion of the national language worldwide either by government agencies or specialized nongovernmental organizations or by introducing university courses taught in English and simultaneously supported native language learning programs - the case of Japan, Sweden, Hungary.[24]

The Romanian language, culture and civilization promoting policy around the world plays a considerable role in the context of multilingualism advocated by the European Union and the Romanian universities internationalization process.

There is a long tradition in this respect and the goal was reached by various methods.

In the first instance, it was the formalization of the Romanian language study in universities abroad which was coeval with the foundation of the Romanian universities.

The mid nineteenth century records the establishment of Romanian language lectureship at the University of Turin and of the Romanian language Department at the University of Budapest. It is also worth mentioning that a few years later, the international prestige of some renowned academics as well as the cultural contacts they had settled with peers abroad, contributed to the foundation of other Romanian departments in European universities: Charles University in Prague, University of Zagreb, where Romanian was introduced as a subject in 1882, University of Leipzig, where Romanian has been studied continuously since 1893, the "Kliment Ohridski" University Sofia-Bulgaria and Beijing Foreign Studies University, where Romanian has been taught since 1948 respectively 1956.[25]

The number of foreign universities where Romanian is studied, either as a mandatory discipline or optionally, increased throughout the years; before 1999 there existed 36 departments in universities in Europe, South and North America and Asia but, beginning with this year, when the activity of these departments and lectureships fell under the responsibility of a special department - the Romanian Language Institute, through which the Romanian language, literature, culture and civilization are promoted in academia abroad, according to the specific European Union language policy - their number reached 45[26]. The Romanian Language Institute, specialized institution subordinated to the Ministry of National Education, was established with the very purpose in view to promote the Romanian language acquisition, to support those who want to learn Romanian and to certify their knowledge of Romanian. The departments and lectureships abroad, operate on the basis of intergovernmental or inter-ministerial agreements, or inter-institutional protocols which confer them the institutional legitimacy of some real interest in learning Romanian by foreigners.

Two significant facts must be emphasized in relation to the promotion of the Romanian language.

Firstly, these departments address to both students who chose to obtain a degree in the field of Romanian but also to those people who, irrespective of educational background, want to learn or deepen their knowledge of Romanian language or culture. The increase in the number of the departments and lectureships abroad proves not only the interest of foreigners to approach Romanian but also of authorities to comply with the European language policy.

Another aspect is that of the language used in the educational process: with very few exceptions imposed by the foreign universities (in France and in German speaking countries), the Romanian lecturers who teach Romanian abroad hardly speak the languages of the countries in question and, consequently, they use English as means of communication, up to the point where students acquire that level of knowledge to enable communication in Romanian. The fact emphasizes on one hand the international character of English, privileged in the competitive market for foreign students mainly because it is so widely learned as a foreign language[27] and, on the other hand, the high level of language knowledge of most students or learners as speakers of English as a second foreign language.

Finally, ever since 1965, when Nicolae Ceauşescu became the leader of the country and aimed to establish international contacts with countries in Africa, Asia, South America or strengthen those with European countries, the number of foreign students in Romanian universities grew continuously reaching its peak in 1981. Thus, in the early 1980s Romania was among the top 15 providers of academic services for foreign students, with a total of nearly 17,000 foreign students studying in the largest universities in the country - Bucharest, Cluj, Iaşi, Timişoara, Craiova.[28]

At that time, Romania had hardly developed study programs in foreign languages, therefore students who

BDD-A26130 © 2016 Centrul Cultural Interetnic Transilvania
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.87 (2026-11-09 02:05:59 UTC)

were to be enrolled in different faculties attended the so called preparatory year. During that year Romanian was studied intensively so as, on the grounds of sound knowledge acquired, students could hear specialty courses held in Romanian. In this context, Romanian was also taught through the instrumentality of English or French - the languages of former colonial powers[29] - depending on the country from which the students came and on their skill in these languages as second languages.

Summer courses in language, culture and civilization constitute one of the oldest initiative of several Romanian universities to promote national language and culture in the world, one of the special programs by which the study of the Romanian language is supported. These courses, attended by both students from universities abroad where there are departments of Romanian and scholars or common people connoisseurs of the Romanian language and culture, are a good opportunity to practice and deepen the acquired knowledge and to get into direct contact with the Romanian culture. The Romanian Ministry of Education encourages participation to these courses by awarding scholarships to the most deserving students who study Romanian as a foreign language.

Note:

1. Rita, Franceschini, *The genesis and development of research in multilingualism: Perspectives for future research*, in Aronin Larissa, Hufeisen, Britta, *The Exploration of Multilingualism*, *Development of research on L3, multilingualism and multiple language acquisition,* Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamin Publishing Company, 2009, p. 34; Gorter, Durket et all, *Benefits of linguistic diversity and multilingualism*, in *Sustainable Development in a Diverse World "Cultural diversity as an asset for human welfare and development*", 2006, p. 5
2. Rita, Franceschini, *The genesis and development of research in multilingualism: Perspectives for future research*, in Aronin Larissa, Hufeisen, Britta, *The Exploration of Multilingualism*, *Development of research on L3, multilingualism and multiple language acquisition,* Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamin Publishing Company, 2009, p. 30
3. Robert, Phillipson, *English-only Europe? Challenging language policy*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 3
4. Rita, Franceschini, *The genesis and development of research in multilingualism: Perspectives for future research*, in Aronin Larissa, Hufeisen, Britta, *The Exploration of Multilingualism*, *Development of research on L3, multilingualism and multiple language acquisition,* Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamin Publishing Company, 2009, p. 34;
5. Peter, Graf, *Multilingual School Education as a Key Qualification in the European Employment Area* in *European Journal of Vocational Training* 18/1999, p. 39
6. Globalization and americanization are, denounced as causes of monolingualism, in the sense of using English - "a kind of linguistic cuckoo, taking over where other breeds of language have historically nested and acquired territorial rights, and obliging non-native speakers of English to acquire the behavioural habits and linguistic forms of English" (Phillipson 2003:4) - as an international language.
7. Robert, Phillipson, *English-only Europe? Challenging language policy*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 5
8. Juliane, House, *English as a lingua franca: A threat to multilingualism?*, in *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 7/4, 2003, p. 562
9. David, Crystal, *English as a global language*, Second edition, Cambridge, University Press, 2003, p. 3
10. Mariana, Nicolae, *Training and Development in Transition. A Romanian Perspective,* in Teachers Develop Teachers Research, IATEFL, UK, 1998, 41
11. Peter, Graf, *Multilingual School Education as a Key Qualification in the European Employment Area* in *European Journal of Vocational Training* 18/1999, p. 43
12. David, Crystal, *English as a global language*, Second edition, Cambridge, University Press, 2003, p. 5
13. House, Juliane. *English as a lingua franca: A threat to multilingualism?*, in *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 7/4, 2003, p. 562
14. Although the 2011 census showed that in Romania live 20 ethnic groups (Hungarians, Roma, Ukrainians, Germans, Turks, Russians, Tatars, Serbs, Slovaks, Bulgarians, Croats, Greeks, Italian, Hebrews, Czechs, Polish, Chinese, Armenians, Macedonians and the Csango people) only a few languages (German, Russian, Italian, Greek, Turkish, Chinese) spoken by these are taught as foreign languages to Romanians - that form the majority of the population - at the level of the pre-university educational system. This situation, which in our view hardly supports receptive multilingualism and receptive multilingual communication, is to a certain extent redressed by universities that diversify their offer, only that, this time, the targeted group is smaller as long as they address strictly to those interested in majoring in foreign languages. Minority languages, particularly those that are official languages of some European countries, should be taught in schools like any other (Graf 1999:41) foreign language as long as the privilege of knowing them can turn into a passport that would smooth the path to new employment opportunities for the almost 20 million foreigners or EU citizens not living in their home countries. (Graf 1999:42) It is a fact that more and more young people who understood the importance of multilingualism ended by taking private lesson in languages they had not studied in school but that are spoken in countries that open gates for certain professionals that come from abroad. "Schools face the task of developing this human capital - today's pupils who are the European citizens of tomorrow - so that social and linguistic differences are overcome and bilingualism is turned into an employment opportunity. Schools (...) were always associated with language learning and are thus in a position, to which no other national institution can aspire, to provide

BDD-A26130 © 2016 Centrul Cultural Interetnic Transilvania
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.87 (2026-11-09 02:05:59 UTC)

support to young people as they build Europe (Graf, 1995, *apud* Graf 1999: 42). This task is not possible, however, unless they are open to new languages (...) Failure to develop the language knowledge of bilingual children means an unimaginable waste of the Europeanness which is already present in this school generation" Peter Graf, 1999, Multilingual School Education as a Key Qualification in the European Employment Area, *European Journal of Vocational Training* No 18 , p. 42.

15. The enlargement of the EU itself, with association agreements with Poland, the Czech and Slovak Republics, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, has benefited not only English but perhaps more particularly German, which is a popular second foreign language in northern and eastern Europe". David, Graddol, *The future of English?,* London, The British Council, 2000, p. 44

16. Peter, Graf, *Multilingual School Education as a Key Qualification in the European Employment Area* in *European Journal of Vocational Training* 18/1999, p. 40

17. Matthias, Hüning et all, *Standard Languages and Multilingualism in European History*, Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2012, p. 4

18. Romania signed bilateral agreements with countries in Europe, USA, Canada that included the possibility of exchanges of students and joined Socrates programme and consequently an impressive number of Romanian students have studied or conducted research in universities abroad.

19. House, Juliane. *English as a lingua franca: A threat to multilingualism?*, in *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 7/4, 2003, p. 570

20. Most Romanian university centres - Bucharest, Cluj, Timişoara, Iaşi, Craiova, Oradea, Târgu Mureş - adopted the same policy meaning that several bachelor or master programmes of study particularly in Medicine, Automatics, Polytechnics, Informatics, Chemistry, Economics, Finance and banking and Public Administration use English as a medium of instruction for both native and foreign undergraduates.

21. Zeevaert, L & Thije, J.D. ten. *Introduction*. In J.D. ten Thije & L Zeevaert (Eds.), *Receptive Multilingualism. Linguistic analyses, language policies and didactic concepts* (pp. 1-25). Amsterdam, Benjamins, p. 13

22. Peter, Graf, *Multilingual School Education as a Key Qualification in the European Employment Area* in *European Journal of Vocational Training* 18/1999, p. 40

23. idem

24. Remus, Pricopie et all, *Analiza Diagnostic "Universităţile, în Contextul Europenizării şi Globalizării",* 2010, p. 33

25. idem

26. ibidem

27. Robert, Phillipson, *English-only Europe? Challenging language policy*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 94

28. Remus, Pricopie et all, *Analiza Diagnostic "Universităţile, în Contextul Europenizării şi Globalizării",* 2010, p. 33

29. Sarah, Thomason, *Language contact.* Edinburgh: University Press, 2001, p. 10.

Bibliography:

Athanassiou, Phoebus. *The Application Of Multilingualism In The European Union Context*, in European Central Bank, *Legal Working Paper* Series, 2/ 2006, pp. 4-36, article available on the web at: https://www.ecb.europa.eu/pub/pdf/scplps/ecblwp2.pdf

Chinnammai, S. *Effects of globalisation on education and culture*, ICDE International Conference, November 19-23, 2005, New Delhi, p. 1, available on web at http://guidedresearchwriting.pbworks.com

Crystal, David. *English as a global language*, Second edition. Cambridge, University Press, 2003

Gorter, Durket et all. *Benefits of linguistic diversity and multilingualism*, in *Sustainable Development in a Diverse World "Cultural diversity as an asset for human welfare and development*", 2006, pp 2-45, available on web at http://www.susdiv.org

Graddol, David. *The future of English?* London,, The British Council, 2000, available on the web at http://www.webalice.it/t.christiansen/learning-elt-future.pdf

Graf, Peter. *Europa als Ursprung und Perspektive schulischer Bildung*, in *Rainer Künzel: Europäische Perspektiven - Perspektiven für Europa*. Osnabrück, 1995, pp. 125-136

Graf, Peter. *Multilingual School Education as a Key Qualification in the European Employment Area* in *European Journal of Vocational Training* 18/1999, pp. 39 - 46, available on web at http://www.cedefop. europa.eu/EN/Files/18-EN.pdf

House, Juliane. *English as a lingua franca: A threat to multilingualism?*, in *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 7/4, 2003, pp. 556-578

Hüning Matthias et all. *Standard Languages and Multilingualism in European History*, Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2012

Nicolae, Mariana. *Training and Development in Transition. A Romanian Perspective,* in Teachers Develop Teachers Research, IATEFL, UK, 1998

Phillipson, Robert. *English-only Europe? Challenging language policy*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003

Pricopie, Remus et all. *Analiza Diagnostic "Universităţile, în Contextul Europenizării şi Globalizării"* 2010, available on the web at http://www.edu2025.ro/UserFiles/File/LivrabileR1/diagnostic_panel5.pdf

Romanian Statistical Yearbook, Education, 2005, available on the web at http://www.insse.ro/cms/files/pdf/ro/cap8.pdf

Thomason, Sarah G. *Language contact.* Edinburgh, University Press, 2001

Sonntag, Selma. *The Local Politics of Global English: Case Studies in Linguistic Globalization*. Maryland, Lexington Books, 2003

Zeevaert, L & Thije, J.D. ten. *Introduction*. In J.D. ten Thije & L Zeevaert (Eds.), *Receptive Multilingualism. Linguistic analyses, language policies and didactic concepts* (pp. 1-25). Amsterdam, Benjamins, 2007, available on web at http://www.jantenthije.eu/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/2007-zeevaert-tenthije-introduction.pdf

BDD-A26130 © 2016 Centrul Cultural Interetnic Transilvania
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.87 (2026-11-09 02:05:59 UTC)