FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: OPEN GATES TO ELITE EDUCATION, CULTURE AND KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract

The European Union is defined by a complex diversity, including nations, languages, civilizations, cultures, values, traditions etc. The principle of unity in diversity expresses a fundamental goal on whose achievement the common European future depends. The same principle states a global necessity, in a world of great diversity, reshaped by the globalization process. A fundamental means of achieving the unity in diversity objective through communication is multilingualism. The process of teaching and learning foreign languages is a main concern in higher education, in the context of the European policies concerning multilingualism. Foreign languages, especially English and French, have a compulsory regime in the study programmes from all academic specialties. A difficulty in this process refers to the perception of languages as complementary disciplines, sometimes marginal, in the non-philological studies programmes, which cover the largest area of higher education systems. Such perception affects the teaching and learning process, its quality and efficiency. Considering the need for language learning a priority remains a matter of mentality, which must be resolved through education in universities, by means of various educational strategies. The arguments are essential: mastering communication competencies in foreign languages provides universal communication tools and, at the same time, means of entering the world of education, culture, knowledge, by access to endless bibliographic resources both on classic and virtual format. Foreign languages are open doors to elite education, training, development, culture, communication, to the universe of knowledge. Unity in diversity in the European Union, the Europe of Knowledge, the new European humanism, the alliance of civilizations, and globalization are possible also by means of foreign languages as universal communication instruments. *Homo europeus*, at the same time *homo universalis* and the global citizen, is the multilingual man.

Keywords: diversity, foreign languages, multilingualism, higher education, critical reception

European Union – a multilingual and multicultural space

Europe is the space of a fabulous historic, national, spiritual, cultural, linguistic diversity. This diversity has common historical and cultural roots in the Greek-Latin civilization and in Christianity, which imprinted a set of values shared across the entire continent. It is from these roots and from the common trunk, however, that the European civilization has developed in a tree like manner, by numerous branches that express a complex and fascinating diversity. Today, the European diversity refers to countries, identities, languages, dialects, civilizations, cultures, traditions and spiritual values, social, cultural and moral norms, religion, mentalities, ethnic groups, minorities, etc. Europe is a geographical and spiritual space whose complex diversity is manifested in a plenary and multidimensional manner, expressing the force of human creativity in asserting community, national and individual identity.

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The European Union represents an unprecedented construction at geopolitical and economic level, being a challenge to the capacity of the member states of ensuring a sustainable development, solidity and endurance. This construction, started more than 60 years ago, is in a continuous process of building. The challenge launched by the philosophy of the European Union also has another dimension: it refers to the very capacity of the member states of creating a space of social and individual existence in the spirit of common values and ideals. The challenge presents a specific difficulty as it is manifest against the background of the European diversity, complex and multilateral. That is why, the philosophy of the European Union is built upon a principle of great scope: *unity in diversity*. It is a defining principle for the *new humanism* that defines, at least theoretically, contemporary Europe.

European Union is a Tower of Babel in the postmodern society, a Tower of Babel whose inhabitants aspire to restore the original unity, by surpassing diversity. Achieving unity in diversity, in other words, the coexistence in a space governed by common values, rules and principles, but observing the specific differences of the nations, communities and individuals, is a difficulty that requires policies and conditions to change it from a projection into reality. That is why, in the scope of concerns and action of the European Union, a primordial place is taken by the policies dedicated to the multilingual and multicultural space.

The policies of the European Union in the field of education focus on the study of foreign languages, on teaching and learning foreign languages in secondary and higher education. Encouraging and supporting multilingualism is a European priority in the field of education. Learning at least two foreign languages by each citizen of the European Union represents a priority promoted by the policies in the field. This vision that promotes multilingualism at the level of society and individual is subordinated to the idea of encouraging multiculturalism, cultural and spiritual diversity in the European space. Such an approach falls within the scope of the horizon opened by the founding principle of the European Union, *unity in diversity*. Knowing one or several foreign languages offers an interpersonal and inter-institutional instrument in a world of diversity and in a complex space of manifesting the national identity. Also, a good command of foreign languages of international circulation, such as English and French, represents the access code in the area of other cultures and civilisations, in the space of universal culture. This way, knowing and speaking foreign languages contributes to achieving unity in diversity, by understanding, relating, communication, cooperation in the spirit of common values and ideals, observing the cultural, spiritual and national identity of each state. Such approaches as the encouragement of the multilingualism and multiculturalism, of unity in diversity are symptomatic phenomena and processes to the philosophy that defines the European Union, to its aspirations at the beginning of the third millennium, in the Knowledge Society and in the Age of Globalization.

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Europe of Knowledge, Bologna Process and Foreign Languages

In terms of **Lisbon Agenda 2000**, the European Union should have become "the most dynamic and complex economy based on knowledge by 2010." Launched by the European Commission on 3 March 2010, **Europe 2020 Strategy** for overcoming the crisis and preparing the EU economy for the 2010-2020 decade refers to three priority factors for economic growth in the EU and at national level, in an interdependence relation: intelligent growth (promoting knowledge, innovation, education and digital society), sustainable growth (a more competitive production, with a more efficient use of resources) and an economic growth favourable to inclusion (a more significant participation of the labour force market, acquiring competencies and fight against poverty). Building Society and Economy based on knowledge remains an objective to be reached against the background of achieving the strategic objectives of the European Union Strategy. In this respect of strategic development, which involves intelligent growth, innovation, education and digital society, inclusion by acquiring competencies, education plays a crucial role, in a construction of great complexity. The key role in this process is played by higher education, as a space of elite academic education, of forming competencies, of specialization and professionalization, but also as an environment of scientific research of excellence. Academic education and scientific research represent the most authorized and advanced source of knowledge, that is why they have the most difficult mission in reaching the proposed goal. In terms of philosophy, according to a saying by Francis Bacon, ***scientia potentia est***, i.e. ***knowledge is power***. As science has as source education, a generic term including teaching, study, research, innovation and creativity, it results from the data of a syllogistic reasoning that ***education is power.***

European higher education is involved in a reform of wide scope, triggered by the Bologna Declaration (19th of June 1999). This document underscores the role of knowledge in the development of Europe in the third millennium: "A Europe of Knowledge is now widely recognised as an irreplaceable factor for social and human growth and as an indispensable component to consolidate and enrich the European citizenship, capable of giving its citizens the necessary competences to face the challenges of the new millennium, together with an awareness of shared values and belonging to a common social and cultural space." Also, the document points out the exceptional role played by higher education for the Europe of Knowledge and for European development: "The importance of education and educational co-operation in the development and strengthening of stable, peaceful and democratic societies is universally acknowledged as paramount (…)". Starting from its principles and action directions, the Bologna Process has proposed a change of vision, paradigm and mission of the European higher education, in order to increase quality, efficiency and competitiveness at world level, in its two fundamental dimensions: academic education and scientific research. The changes, part of the Bologna Process, are subordinated to reaching two

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objectives of cardinal importance: achieving European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and European Research Area (ERA). By building them, the European Union aspires to achieve, by the year 2020, the European Knowledge Area (EKA). The Bologna Process thus proves to be a means of achieving Europe of Knowledge.

In building Europe of Knowledge and as part of the philosophy of the Bologna Process, foreign languages play a key role. First of all, studying and knowing foreign languages contribute to achieving some of the objectives proposed under the Bologna Declaration: a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, the implementation of the Diploma Supplement, the promotion of European citizens employability and the international competitiveness of the European higher education system, the first cycle degree relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification, the establishment of a system of credits as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility, lifelong learning, promotion of mobility for students, access to study and training opportunities and to related services, for teachers, researchers and administrative staff, promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance, promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education, particularly with regards to curricular development, interinstitutional co-operation, mobility schemes and integrated programmes of study, training and research.

At the same time, foreign languages represent a primordial field of the higher education process at European level. Acquiring competencies of communication in foreign languages is one of the priorities of the European Union, formulated by the policies that promote multilingualism and also the priorities of the European higher education reform. Mention must be made that reform determines a change of paradigm at the level of the European higher education, defined by elements such as: quality, creativity, innovation, excellence, performance in academic education and scientific research, orientation of the education process towards formation of competencies and professional qualification for the labour market, transforming higher education institutions in spaces of efficiency, pragmatism in education and competitiveness at European and world level. All these elements included in the new paradigm of the higher education cannot be conceived outside the competencies of communication in foreign languages of international circulation. A good command of foreign languages, of at least two, in accordance with the recommendations of the European Union, offers the students and graduates, teaching and research staff instruments of communication at European and international level, but also means of knowledge of exceptional value to personal and professional development. Against this background, the European policies in the field of multilingualism and the new paradigm of European higher education have in promoting the learning of foreign languages an important element of convergence.

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The Official Regime of Foreign Languages in Higher Education

After 1990, under the circumstances of an unprecedented development of the higher education in Romania, by increasing the number of universities, the study of foreign languages has been subject to different approaches and regimes, according to the managerial policy and priorities of the educational process in each higher education institution and, last, but not least, according to the importance given at the level of educational plans.

As of 1999, together with the signing of the Bologna Declaration, Romanian higher education has progressively entered a process of complex reform, which regards its structure, content and goals. The transformations within the higher education system take place under the auspices of the Bologna Process, which has aimed at changing the vision, paradigm and mission of European higher education.

The European policy of multilingualism has had positive effects in the Romanian space as well. Against the background of the European interest in promoting foreign languages at the level of its citizens, in Romanian education, especially in the higher education one, various positive changes have occurred. Foreign languages have become subjects present in the university curricula in most study programs and their position has consolidated. In most cases, from the regime of optional disciplines, foreign languages have become compulsory and they have been generalized.

Currently, all the study programs and all the specializations in the Romanian higher education institutions, the undergraduate and graduate studies include mandatorily the study of foreign languages, especially English and French. With most undergraduate studies, such as law, economic sciences, medicine, information technology, psychology, communication and public relations, international relations and European studies, political sciences, etc. the study of foreign languages is mandatory in the first two years, both for day courses and distance learning. The access to the graduation examination is conditioned on proving by the candidates of their competencies of communication in foreign languages, by means of the certificate of linguistic competence. Also, foreign languages are studied as mandatory disciplines in most master's degree programs, at least two semesters. In pyramidal order of the Bologna cycles studies, one of the conditions for the access to the doctoral studies, part of the selection and admission process, is the proving of communication competencies in at least one language of universal circulation, mainly English and French. An increasing number of Romanian higher education institutions offer study programs in foreign languages, in English, French or German, at the level of modules or in full. Examples in this respect are the programs in the field of medical sciences, economic sciences or engineering. The programs of studies in foreign languages are in full development, which proves the European direction of the Romanian higher education under the auspices of reform. Another phenomenon that takes place at the level of Romanian higher education is the internationalization of studies. In this context, universities are open not only to a diversified domestic public, but also to an

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international public, offering foreign students, from Europe, Asia, Africa and from all over the world, special study programs in languages of wide international circulation. This phenomenon is part of the more complex process of massification and internationalization of higher education which takes place at European and global level. In terms of such process, universities become inclusive and responsive, they extend their addressability to wider and wider categories of public, facilitating their access to higher education and to quality formation in order to qualify for the labour market. The massification process extends its scope beyond the borders of the national systems of higher education, by opening access to the public in other systems, countries and continents, under the form of internationalization of studies. Foreign languages of international circulation, such as English and French, are instruments of communication, information, formation, training, research and development, part of the process of internalization of higher education.

The current position of the study of foreign languages in the Romanian higher education represents a remarkable progress as compared to the last decades and especially in the context of the reform of the Romanian education after 1990, a period dominated by experiments and a tendency to return the system to its European matrix. The mandatory regime of foreign languages in the Romanian higher education, irrespective of specialization and field, proves at the same time the synchronization of the policies of academic education in Romania with the ones in the European Union, promoted by the European Commission, and also with the developments of the reform of European higher education under the sign of the Bologna Process. The same processes and phenomena take place in general, but with specific differences also in the higher education systems and institutions from the other countries of the European Union. The study of foreign languages in the universities of the member states has similar evolutions with the ones in Romania. It is a logical integration in these evolutions, as Romanian higher education is part of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

In the spirit of the objectives set by the Bologna Declaration, the generalized presence of foreign languages in the university curricula and their position as mandatory disciplines contribute to the reform of the Romanian higher education. Thus, the study of foreign languages seen from the perspective of results, of acquiring competencies of communication in foreign languages of international circulation, facilitates academic mobility of students, teaching staff and researchers, exchanges of experience, the system of easily readable and comparable degrees, the implementation of the Diploma Supplement, the system of transferable credits at European level, lifelong learning programs, European co-operation in quality assurance, promotion of the European dimensions in higher education, curricular development, interinstitutional co-operation, mobility schemes and integrated programmes of study, training and research, the Erasmus programs of academic exchanges, professional integration of graduates in the labour market in the European Union and beyond the European frontiers.

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Still, things are not fully as they seem. There is a difference between the mandatory regime of foreign languages in higher education and their real position at the level of reception and even approach in the teaching-learning process in universities. Mention must be made that the de-synchronization between status and reception is not uniformly expressed in general at the level of higher education, but is manifest in various degrees, covering a wide range of diversity. Anyhow, this difference between the official position and reception expresses a difficulty in the field of the study of foreign languages and multilingual education, a difficulty that needs to be progressively combated and eliminated.

The difficulty mentioned here expresses the distance between the theoretical and administrative horizon, and the practical position of foreign languages. At the first level, as we have seen, they are mandatory disciplines in the education plans of the study programs. Also at theoretical level, most students in the Bologna cycles of higher education, bachelor, master and doctoral studies, recognize the necessity and usefulness of knowing foreign languages, of a good command of the communication competencies in languages of international circulation, such as English and French. There is, however, a problem of reception, according to which foreign languages are understood as general culture disciplines, complementary, not part of the priorities of specialization and which, therefore, have a secondary, somehow subsidiary importance. This approach is valid, of course, in case of the study programs that do not have a philological character and in which foreign languages are not disciplines of specialization. The problem is that non philological specializations constitute the majority of the study programs in all the higher education systems. Such disciplines are law, economic sciences, medicine, psychology, engineering, social and political sciences, communication and public relations, public administration, chemistry, physics, biology, etc., which cover a great part of the fields of knowledge, except for humanities, philology and foreign languages. Thus, this situation presents a special kind of complexity and indeed raises a problem of the higher education, not only in Romania, but also in the other educational systems of the European Union.

Consequently, in the faculties of non-philological disciplines, there is a tendency, which unfortunately is more than a tendency, that foreign languages should be perceived by the students at the practical level of the education process, as marginal study disciplines. This understanding of foreign languages arises in a direct report to receipting the disciplines of specialization, which have to do with the specificity of the study programs, to which students give priority. Such a perspective has consequences at the level of approaching foreign languages, in the teaching-learning process. As they are not considered priority disciplines, but only complementary ones, or even secondary or marginal, students do not pay the necessary attention and de not make the efforts necessary to study. Such an approach, in its turn, leads to a diminution of the capacity of

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students to acquire competencies of communication in the foreign language or languages studied, competencies necessary to the process of education, to their own formation, professional and personal development.

This uncertain position of foreign languages at the level of reception and approach has explanations that have to do with mentality, with a tradition of reception and an insufficient culture of multilingualism. At the level of mentality, there is the idea, which has become a prejudice, according to which there are fundamental disciplines and less important disciplines. Fundamental disciplines would include exact sciences, mathematics, physics, chemistry and recently information technology, then other fields, such as law, economic sciences, technical sciences, social sciences, etc. In an empiric epistemological hierarchy of the disciplines of study and of the fields of knowledge, foreign languages do not have a priority position. This mentality has developed and continued in time, so that now it has to do with a tradition of reception. It has developed also against the background of an uncertain culture of multilingualism, an insufficient awareness of the role and importance of knowing foreign languages at the level of individuals and society. Also, it has been favoured by superficial approaches: the contact with foreign languages, especially English, by means of audio-visual media and internet has often led to the opinion and, at the same time, illusion, at individual level, of having a good command of the communication competencies in one or another of the foreign languages. The real possibilities of communication in foreign languages contradict such an opinion. Reality proves, in fact, that many students, with different educational and cultural backgrounds, have poor competencies of communication in foreign languages. This situation is aggravated by the way of receipting and approaching foreign languages in the educational process.

This problematic approach of foreign languages expresses a tendency and a reality that cannot and must not be generalized and made absolute in the Romanian higher education or in the European one. Wherever it is manifest, and its occurs rather often, it expresses a contradiction between the official regime of foreign languages, regarded as mandatory disciplines in the curricula policies, in study programs and in the education plans and the way foreign languages are perceived by the target public. Such a perception, insufficient and precarious, influences also the actual teaching-learning process. In the absence of a priority interest and of students' involvement in the act of learning, in the absence of a feedback to the teaching expectations, there is a risk of lowering the standards of the teaching-learning process, of getting away from excellence, performance and competitiveness in acquiring and mastering competencies of communication in foreign languages.

Considered at the practical level of perception in the higher education system as mere general culture disciplines, which excludes them from the fundamental disciplines, priority disciplines in order of individual options, foreign languages have suffered and still do suffer from this perception. It is a problem of mentality, which has survived today. It would be desirable that the official regime of foreign languages, which are mandatory

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disciplines, present in all curricula, should determine in time a change at the level of mentality and perception. This is a necessary and mandatory change to the benefit of students and higher education in the Europe of Knowledge.

Foreign Languages: Open Gates to Communication and Knowledge

The difficulty regarding the perception of foreign languages in the higher education is in complete contradiction with the European and global policies and developments in the field of multilingualism. In the Knowledge Society, each citizen should have competencies of communication in at least two languages. By means of the educational policies of the higher education institutions, the problems of perception need to be corrected, keeping in mind that the offer of studying foreign languages, present in the education plan as mandatory, is to the benefit of students from various faculties, specializations or educational cycles. On the background of the special heed paid to foreign languages at European and world level, the study of foreign languages in higher education, irrespective of faculty and specialization, should become a priority.

It is absolutely true that the disciplines of various specializations (law, economic sciences, engineering, psychology, law, agronomy, etc, etc.) should represent priorities for undergraduate and graduate students during study and research. At the same time, this regime should not exclude the importance presented by the learning of foreign languages, acquiring, improving and specializing competencies of communication in languages of international circulation. The "main" disciplines and foreign languages do not exclude each other, do not compete, but are complementary and, from this point of view, they must be considered together. Foreign languages must be understood and approached as communication instruments and as means of access to the epistemological universe of each specialization. Their importance is fundamental as they ensure access to specialized information, scientific resources, real and virtual bibliographies, practically unlimited. Seen from this point of view, foreign languages can be assumed as priority disciplines, of a primordial importance in the process of study and preparation, as a means of access to the universe of knowledge. Also from this perspective, the approaching of specialized disciplines becomes difficult to conceive without the contribution of foreign languages, given nowadays circumstances of the developments in various sectors and fields of knowledge. Thus, studying foreign languages and acquiring or improving competencies of communication help the development of the students in the fields of specialization by offering them instruments of communication and knowledge necessary to the training, development and improvement of their professional qualification. Without foreign languages, the competencies in the specialization cannot develop up to the standards required at European level.

Thus, we can reach the conclusion, which is at the antipode of the tendency in the general perception, that foreign languages are fundamental disciplines, both from the perspective of general culture, by opening the knowledge horizons, and of specialization.

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In both cases, knowing foreign languages offers the students communication instruments with a global scope and the possibility of access to the universe of knowledge, which is nowadays in full expansion and continuous development, in geometrical progression. Foreign languages are mandatory and fundamental both to personal development, under the name of general culture, and to the academic education and formation throughout the university cycles, to scientific research, to acquiring specialized competencies, in various field of study, to training, formation, professional qualification and integration into the labour market in the European Union and in the world.

In higher education, academic education and scientific research, foreign languages are a necessity without which university studies or research activities cannot be conceived. Knowledge of foreign languages offers the students access to mobility, study experiences, training or specialization stages in foreign universities, possibilities of international communication and cooperation, participation in European or world scientific events in the field of specialization or in inter or trans-disciplinary fields. Moreover, foreign languages open their way to wide fields of knowledge, by the direct access to scientific resources and specialized bibliographies, publications of international prestige, studies, courses, treatises in the area of fundamental or applied research, results of the most recent scientific research, all in printed form or, especially, in virtual form.

The benefits of competencies of communication in foreign languages to undergraduate and graduate students are valid also for the teaching staff and scientific research. Also, at the teaching level of the academic education and scientific research, the foreign languages are communication instruments that facilitate international cooperation and partnerships, involvement in academic mobility and university exchanges, attending courses in foreign languages at universities in Europe and in the world, but also in the country of origin, participation in congresses, conferences, scientific symposia, workshops, seminars, exchange of good practices, etc. at European and world level. At the same time, foreign languages have a cardinal mission and importance as a means of access to specialized information, scientific resources, international databases, and bibliographies in the fields of interest, in other words, to knowledge. A key role of the foreign languages in the Knowledge Society is also their quality of being a means of international expression of the results of the scientific research activities conducted by the higher education teaching staff and research staff.

All these have a simple explanation: languages such as English and French are communication means of universal impact, which cover the academic environments and scientific research, and go beyond such environment to the fields of practical existence, in the entire range of their variety. At the same time, the biggest part of human knowledge is expressed, in original or translated, in these languages.

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Globalization Process and the Languages of International Circulation

At the level of the European Union and the world under globalization, there are generous concepts such as *knowledge society, unity in diversity, alliance of civilisation, new humanism*. All these express the intention of the states to structure their existence according to new principles and paradigms, in a common form of global dimensions, and of instating, against this background, a new world order. It remains to be seen whether such notions will succeed in generating the expected changes, realities to the benefit of humanity, or will remain mere projections of a new utopia, this time of planetary dimensions. For the time being, in the European Union, the objectives of the Lisbon Agenda projected in the year 2000 for the year 2010 have not been reached, under the circumstances of the world crisis. The Europe 2020 Strategy represents a new attempt to initiate a common action to make the European dream come true.

These developments of an unprecedented scope at European and world level involve changes of great complexity. European Union aspires to become the most powerful and competitive economy in the world. At the same time, emerging countries such as China and India grow impetuously globally. A dialectic evolution of forces reshapes the planetary order, part of a fierce competition in all fields. In this competition, European Union bases its development on the force of education and research. The achievement of the Society and Economy based on knowledge represents the means by which EU aspires to reach the objectives of the new Strategy.

Academic education and scientific research constitute the engine of the progress of the European society. In order to produce knowledge at the highest level, higher education needs to reform itself in the spirit of quality and excellence, performance and competitiveness. The Bologna Reform formulates a new paradigm of the higher education at European level, part of a process that tends to create the European Space of Knowledge. These metamorphoses launch important challenges at the level of the education systems, universities and human resources involved in education and research. It is a process of an unprecedented scope and difficulty, against the background of a tough competition at global level. Europe and the entire world are engaged in a race for quality education, advance research, creativity and innovation, excellence, performance and competitiveness, in one single word, for knowledge. Knowledge is power.

Europe of Knowledge must be regarded in the context of the globalization process. Both in the European Union and at the level of the globalized world, foreign languages play a key role: to ensure communication between countries, organizations, institutions and individuals. If, in the space of the European Union and Europe overall there exists a great variety of nations, languages, identities, civilizations, cultures, values, mentalities, traditions, etc., at global level we deal with a much wider diversity, whose limits are difficult to establish. At the same time, globalization is a process that tends to mitigate differences, alleviate diversity, by extending at global level various political, economic, social, cultural etc. models. It is a process of uniformity, planetary

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massification which also presents benefits, but also a series of risks, regarding the conservation and asserting identity and diversity.

The existence of today's world, at international, inter-institutional and inter-personal level, cannot be conceived without common communication instruments, with a wide scope of action. These instruments are foreign languages of international circulation, mainly English and French. The global extension of these languages transcends today the Anglophone and Francophone areas, historically determined, and covers large geographical spaces by the force of the civilization which they express and of the models promoted by them and by the association with the prestige of the cultures of origin. To different extents and on different spaces, English and French play today the role of *lingua franca* in a world of great diversity, under globalization. Part of the global diversity, knowing these languages offers a common communication code which makes dialogue and understanding possible at international level. The Tower of Babel of today's world becomes coherent from the point of view of language and communication by the fact that its inhabitants, citizens of the planet, can speak languages of international circulation.

In terms of the old and new humanism, in the centre of existence and, in the current context, of globalization is man. According to today's terms, *homo europeus*, *the global citizen* must be an educated individual, trained, with multiple competencies, qualified at high standards in their field of specialization. The mandatory competencies, acquired, improved, specialized and refined in the higher education, include also communication competencies. Today's citizen of the European Union and planet is the *multilingual man,* who masters, in terms of the European policies, at least two languages of international circulation.

Conclusions - A priority worldwide

Knowledge of foreign languages has a paramount importance in the postmodern era. Humanity passes through a period of great transformations, at national, European and world level, in the framework of scale processes aiming to establish a new global worder. A defining element of this world is diversity, a complex, versatile, plurivalent reality. The diversity of the world and individuals should be seen in at least two perspectives. Firstly, it represents the very specific of Europe, which includes history, languages, civilizations, cultures, traditions, etc. All these express a fabulous spiritual and material wealth, with shared values and specific differences, a heritage to be preserved and perpetuated, a treasure of national and individual creativity. On the other hand, this diversity can be a problem, a difficulty in the context of European and global evolutions, of globalization, which aim to bring nations and individuals to the common denominator of certain values, principles and objectives, for the common existence and development of humankind. A problem in the context of this global diversity is the great linguistic variety of Europe and of the world. In this postmodern Babylon, communication is not

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possible within such diversity otherwise than by reducing it to a common code. The solution is a common language of humanity, to be understood and spoken by everyone. But there is no longer a common world-wide spread natural language as existed before the Tower of Babel, and human attempts to impose artificial languages (esperanto, volapük etc.) for compensating this absence have failed. Under these conditions, the solution is represented by the universal languages, such as English and French, which play the role of *lingua francas* in the world of today and, probably, of tomorrow.

Language learning, at least two out of the mother tongue, is a priority of EU, promoted through the policies related to multilingualism. "Mother tongue plus two" expresses an objective of these policies in the European Union and Europe as a whole. The language learning environment is developed, above all, by the education systems. In this context, higher education plays a special role in the acquisition, development and specialization of communication skills in foreign languages. At university level, language learning is promoted through the study programs and curricula, regardless of specialization, foreign languages having a compulsory status. Yet, at the reception level, involving the target audience, i.e. students, there is a tendency for foreign languages to be understood and addressed as complementary subjects, in the general education and culture area, of secondary importance. In this context, a contradiction appears between the official regime of foreign languages as compulsory subjects and their marginal status in the students' reception horizon, in the teaching and learning process.

These issues of perception represent an obstacle to language learning and acquisition of the necessary communication competencies, required by the knowledge society and the today's world. In a general context, they express a difficulty in achieving the goals promoted through the multilingualism policy. The critical or erroneous perception of foreign languages, the insufficient assumption of their importance for the personal and professional becoming represent a matter of mentality, perpetuated throughout a tradition of their understanding and approach. The reception problems and therefore the approach of foreign languages should be addressed and solved at the levels of the education systems and of the higher education institutions, through strategies aiming to determine the awareness of their paramount importance and by promoting foreign languages in the study programs and curricula, and also through the lifelong learning forms of education and training. These strategies must be built around the importance of language competencies nowadays, in a world where education, science, communication play a vital role in the economic, social and human development. Arguments in favor of foreign languages are simple, but essential: their knowledge offers communication tools at international and, at the same time, opens up paths to the universe of knowledge through the open access to bibliographies, databases, real and virtual scientific resources. Therefore, they should be regarded and addressed as fundamental disciplines, beyond or within the areas of specialization themselves. Through such strategic programs and arguments, some conservative mentality and inertia in the reception area, still present in higher education, will be defeated, in favor of the

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view that foreign languages, through their fabulous opening, play a crucial role in the academic education and scientific research, communication and knowledge, innovation and creativity.

Teaching and learning foreign languages should remain a priority of the higher education systems and institutions in the European Union, Europe and worldwide. The acquisition of communication competencies in foreign languages at the highest levels should be assumed as a necessity and also become a priority of every citizen of the planet. Languages are the means of communication and knowledge necessary for each individual in the education, training, personal and professional development process. In this respect, foreign languages are wide open doors to elite education, science, culture and knowledge, in a fascinating universe, of endless resources. In the long run, languages are a means to make diversity coherent, to achieve communication world-wide, in the Knowledge Society and in the globalizing world of the third millennium.

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