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The Significance of Plurilingualism in Sustainable University Library Services

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Abstract. Language is the main and the most effective vehicle of communication among people, a tool to fix their ideas and express them to their neighbour. The degree to which people manage to raise a foundation based on the rules of the language which they was born with depends on the degree to which their message has been received and understood; the higher this degree is, the better the communication is and the happier people are. This fact is imperative nowadays, in a vivid and modern society, since the unprecedented explosion of the media, especially the virtual one, requires that people should know other languages, mainly English, besides speaking their mother tongue. Free movement, especially of individuals looking for a job or for completing studies, should be taken into account. The university libraries face a great flow of young foreign students, so it is important that any librarian from all library services possess a bit of foreign languages, at least a bit of English; the more this bit, the more sustainable their activity. This goal could be achieved by means of language-learning courses, of all levels, but the university curriculum must include such compulsory foreign language-learning courses (English language learning), focused on both general and professional thesaurus. No less important is the role of language proficiency in other library services, other than communication and reference services, especially in the research activity, where librarians deal with texts mostly written in English. This article, therefore, aims to argue the importance of knowing foreign languages, especially of knowing English, in the effort to raise and maintain a high standard of the library services.

Keywords: University Libraries; Language; Plurilingualism; Library Services; Communication; Translating Services; Foreign Language Learning

Introduction

Language is the most effective vehicle of communication, a means by which human beings gather their daily needs, ask for help, refuse to be treated merely,

have and demand their rights. Moreover, when our "nowadays" are driven by the Third Wave there is practically no human activity without language speaking, the only machine by means of information, ideas, and opinions are traded. Language is even used to encrypt and decrypt the messages send by electronic devices.

Therefore, it is all the more useful and important to speak a foreign language or several languages, an imperative library staff in general and university libraries in particular must align themselves with, given the increasing number of foreign students who attends libraries, on the one hand, and the more varied publications in a foreign language.

This paper looks into the role of foreign languages in sustainable university library services, viewed from the perspective of the English language, which is considered to be a world language, the most popular spoken throughout the world, but the role of other foreign-languages is also taken into account. The paper advocates for removing the communication barriers that sometimes lie between the library personnel and the documents written in other languages or the readers speaking other languages. It also tries to provide solutions, most of them cheap and at everyone's fingertips. One of the solutions would be paying greater attention to foreign languages by the Librarianship and Information Science programmes, that must include them as compulsory courses in their curriculum.

To properly explore the subject submitted to discussion, this paper is basically divided into the following sections: first, it discusses the concept of language, followed by the one of university library; second, it reviews the role of the foreign language proficiency in the sustainability of effective library services – mainly the importance of studying English –, starting with the importance of foreign language learning during the whole process of education – even at an early age; finally, it tries to offer some ways of developing the library personnel's foreign competencies.

The concepts of language and university library

It is well-known that language is an effective tool to communicate, as old as man's existence. Performed in verbal or written form, in the language of gestures, signs or body language, communication is a process that involves the sending and receiving of one or more messages. Mankind even used language to define the term *language*, having proposed a great number of definitions, which cannot be mentioned here due to the limits of time and space. But all language researchers underlined the fundamental purpose of language in communication, as an indispensable aspect of human existence and co-existence. The picture below

summarizes all the definitions given to language as a carrier of the message – the product of communication.

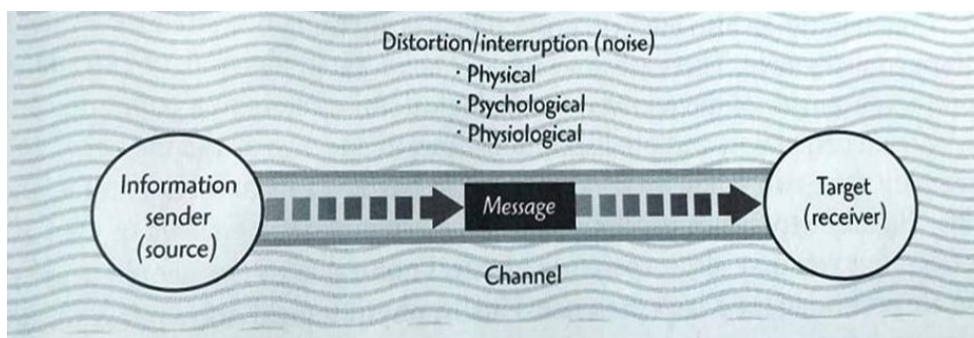


Fig. 1. Linear Model of Communication.

Sursa: West, Richard, Turner, Lynn H. (2000). *Introducing Communication Theory. Analysis and Application*. Mountain View, Mayfield Publishing Company.

There has been much debate lately about multilingualism and plurilingualism, two apparently equivalent terms which are significant parameters for our society's evolution. They seem to be equivalent, indeed, but they define different concepts. First, multilingualism is the ability of speaking many languages proficiently, not necessarily perfectly, whereas plurilingualism is the competence (and the ease) of a person to speak more than one language and to switch them according to different circumstances.

In this respect, The European Commission's multilingualism policy has three aims: to encourage language learning and promote linguistic diversity in society; to promote a multilingual economy; to give citizens access to EU information in their own languages. The Commission also sets out various ways to promote language learning, such as: different programmes as part of *Erasmus+* (*Lingua*, *Socrates*, *Leonardo* programmes); updating the training of language teachers; research programmes on overcoming language barriers through new information technologies; a study of best practices in early language learning; creating academic chairs in multilingualism and interculturalism; implementing the *European Indicator of Language Competence*, etc.

Multicultural dialogue is thus focused on, as an instrument for stability and solidarity among the members of a community. This requires intercultural education, without affecting the cultural identity and undermining the civic life, as plurilingualism and cultural diversity are a fundamental component of European identity. And in the same spirit, languages cannot be separated from culture.

This principle is also the basis of education in universities and their nerve centres - libraries. Libraries are the factories in which the future workers of science are trained for study and research and, why not, for communication.

University libraries are basically the pride of their institutions, and, as well as their parent institutions, are serving the teaching and research needs of the students, staff and researchers, as their mission is fundamentally tied with the communication of knowledge. That is why they must determine the unique ways to fulfill this mission, according to the general functions of a university library: providing information materials required for the academic programmes of the parent institution; providing information resources in consonance with the needs of faculty and the students; providing information resources for recreation and for personal self-development of the users; providing study accommodation in a useful variety of locations; providing protection and security for these materials; cooperating with other libraries at appropriate levels for improved information services; providing specialized information service to appropriate segments of the wider community.

As we said, in this whole process of education, language is the main vehicle of communication that carries information, the whole process of education from the learned to the learners.

The role of the foreign language proficiency in the sustainability of effective library services

In today's global society, proficiency in foreign languages is an important skill. Proficiency in a foreign language, especially in English, facilitates information accessing and promotion. By sharing it with the world, this brings immense benefits to the university library, and implicitly to the parent institution.

Certain factors have hindered the delivery of effective library services, and one of them is the lack of language proficiency particularly as regards foreign languages. According to a popular saying going that "it is good to catch them young", it is important to acquire foreign languages in school, thus, taking into consideration the wisdom in the above adage, educational planners should enshrine a foreign language as a compulsory (not optional) subject at the primary and secondary school levels.

At the university level, students of Librarianship and Information science should be made to take courses in foreign language, particularly English, which will bring about sustainable and effective library services. That is why the Librarianship and

Information Science programmes must include courses of foreign languages in their curriculum, especially focused on the communication vocabulary and the professional language acquisition. And since English has become the international lingua franca, they have to make it essential for professionals everywhere to master the language in order to conduct research and to communicate with their peers around the world. For professionals in non-English speaking countries, this means learning the specialized terminology of their fields, as well as the general vocabulary and grammar of the English language. Otherwise, one solution might be to help their graduates develop applied language skills to enable them to successfully communicate with people in their communities, free of charge or low cost, online or not.

Foreign language skills is useful in about all the library services: collection development, acquisitions, cataloging, reference, and even library administration. Librarians in collection development need them in order to select documents for a particular subject area. They need to read and write – they need reading knowledge –, or to negotiate with the distributors of foreign-language documents – they need speaking ability. Furthermore, knowing an “exotic” – i.e. a rarely spoken foreign language – is necessary especially for the collection development service, for ordering and acquisition, but also for the processing service. Sometimes, the donation of book in a rarely spoken language is denied for the reason that it will not be read by anyone, or simply because the librarians cannot process that book. Cataloguers need to process the documents in a variety of languages, and the more languages they know and the more of those languages they know, the better. They need to provide complete bibliographic descriptions and accurate subject headings. Reference librarians need to communicate verbally or in writing in the users' native languages, or in English in order to assist them. And last but not least, library administrators need to know and to understand the proficiency requirements of staff positions.

Ways of developing the library personnel's language competencies.

The great majority of foreign language collections do not have language specialists to process them. Where there are professionals with some language skills they certainly are consulted, on the basis of records indicating which staff members have competencies in foreign languages and what those languages are, because those professionals happen to work in different departments. This is a solution that all libraries should apply. Another major problem that libraries confront with is funding and due to the high cost of foreign-language materials from abroad, libraries buy fewer and fewer.

It is therefore very needful that the university library staff acquire language skills particularly foreign-language skills. Having thus established the fact that language proficiency is very much needful for sustainable library services in the university library, what then is the way forward? Below there are a few strategies that could help in tackling the problem of the lack of proficiency foreign languages by the university library personnel all over the world. But first of all, we have to admit that these ideas for “getting by” in a language for small-scale language projects lack the thoroughness of in-depth study.

Most libraries offer reading-comprehension courses to their personnel inside the building, lectured by their own librarians who have these skills. It is the cheapest way of professional training, but, as a whole, these are English courses (or other international languages, such as French, German, Italian and even Spanish). On the other hand, librarians could be offered to participate in foreign-language courses organized by some universities for their graduate students, by means of a cooperation programme. These are ideal for gathering solid reading knowledge, besides giving an overview of grammar and gaining vocabulary on various subjects by reading, speaking, writing. Moreover, they could be ideal for studying the “exotic” languages mentioned above, such as Russian, Arabic, Hebrew, Hindi, Japanese and other Asian languages, etc. Studying these languages should not necessarily be discounted, as the importance of them is increasing dramatically due to the continuing internationalization of libraries and their collections.

There are librarians who cannot fit a traditional course into their schedules, so in this situation online courses are available, as a cheaper alternative to the first. Even if these courses provide general vocabulary in a foreign language, they can be a good starting point for “handling a language skillfully”, as the poet Charles Baudelaire once said. But before choosing this kind of learning, it is very important for everyone to consider what learning style fits them, since some learn better visually, others by hearing, and others can combine both methods.

There is also a category of people who further education through self-study, and librarians are no exception. In this situation, they carry all the burden of responsibility for learning the language, that is why they have to make their own study plan up, an organized schedule outlining: study times – how many hours a day they study, one hour or one day a week will give slow results –, learning goals – gaining grammar fundamentals and a solid vocabulary and, as regards librarians, they should include library-specific terminology –, instructional materials. As with these instructional materials, some tips could be helpful: materials that provide texts on a variety of subjects are far better than those focusing on conversational

skills – newspapers and magazines will do it the best; popular fiction such as science fiction or mystery in the target language can refresh or brush up a language studied years before, as it reinforces grammar concepts and basic vocabulary, building confidence and fluency in the language; for those who know English but they want to learn other languages, bilingual news websites help with testing comprehension by means of English. And take in as many as conferences, workshops and seminars you can, and if you do not have enough money, find a sponsor! It is such an excellent way to enhance your performance, to master any foreign language!

What do university librarians do when they have to handle a book written in a completely unfamiliar language (these books are usually old and used part of donations). Instead of immediately signing up for a language course, librarians may find some short-term workaround solutions. For instance, they may have a foreign student help with the language or the transliteration, in the case of other alphabets. Also, they may send the book to the foreign languages faculties, where the curriculum includes practical training courses. What is more, some students do volunteer work. It is an economical method, if not free of charge, and the library of that faculty can keep a copy of the book, if it finds it useful, too.

Librarians who know related foreign languages can also use them in reading a language completely new to them. Knowledge of German and English can be of assistance in Dutch, readers of Italian can easily understand, why not?, quite a bit of Romanian, whereas Spanish is closely related to Portuguese. In this regard, there are invaluable librarian listservs as language reference sources, such as: AUTOCAT, one of the leading cataloguing discussion lists, which regularly includes postings about various lesser-known languages, or an abundance of online and printed language dictionaries and reference books – Allen's *A Manual of European Languages for Librarians* (1999), providing grammar concepts, a library-specific vocabulary, as well as a sample text in each language and corresponding English translations is to be mentioned here.

An expensive method for improving or learning foreign languages, other than English, is paying visits to the libraries from abroad, where librarians can be taught basic language. It would be an excellent experience exchange, which might be done with the support of a foreign cultural centre. Another example of exchange programme would be for in-service library personnel, for whom their institutions should liaise with these foreign culture centres to enable them acquire skills for communication or for working on documents in those languages.

On the other hand, library staff who have elementary knowledge of a foreign language wish to further their studies could be encouraged to do so by a scholarship in those countries. The funds needed for this job could be acquired by government or by sponsors.

Last but not least, libraries must pay attention to plurilinguistic publicity, which plays a major role in promoting their collections and services, and this could be ideally done through personal contacts, which is an inexpensive way for promotion. In addition to the website of the library, the most common publicity – which, by the way, must have an interface in English, too -, printing promotional materials imbibes much money, time and ideas. Although some believe that having a visible location for native language or foreign-language promotional materials encourages the users to come to the library, we believe that placing the right librarian in the right place in the library at the right library timetable is worth every penny.

Finally, because of having skipped failure to warn: this paper was not recommended for nonspeakers of English!

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to understand the significance and usefulness of knowing one or several foreign languages by the library personnel in order to fulfill their duties, to increase the number of their users. It also summarily investigated the role of foreign-language study in the Librarianship and Information Science curriculum. Nowadays, in a rapidly changing society, permanently in search for needs – as need is mother of research – language proficiency must be a necessary not an optional tool in the practice of effective librarianship. A librarian must know at least one international language. A librarian must know at least English. Due to lack of language proficiency, mainly the English proficiency, library services, first of all the information accessing and dissemination, selection and ordering of books with foreign language titles, as well cataloguing of these books are hampered. This paper further suggested that library personnel be trained on foreign language proficiency, particularly in English, but that they may choose to learn any language they want. This will enable any university library personnel to keep abreast with the counterparts throughout the world, besides enhancing sustainable library services.

There are several methods for acquiring foreign languages – in case the university librarians have not studied them in a school environment – or improving them. They all help university librarians with acquiring both professional skills and language skills that could lead to sustainable university library services.

Note

(1) A concept introduced by Alvin Toffler to describe a genuinely new way of life based on diversified, renewable energy sources; on methods of production that make most factory assembly lines obsolete; on new, non-nuclear families; on a novel institution that might be called the “electronic cottage”; and on radically changed schools and corporations of the future. The emergent civilization writes a new code of behaviour for the people, carrying them beyond standardization, synchronization, and centralization, beyond the concentration of energy, money, and power. Toffler, Alvin (1981). *The Third Wave*, New York, Bantam Books, p. 10.

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