

SOCIAL NETWORKS AS A TOOL FOR IMPROVING THE PLURILINGUAL AND PLURICULTURAL COMPETENCES IN ONLINE INTERACTIONS OF ESP STUDENTS

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Internal university survey (2021)

Abstract: The paper presents the results of an online questionnaire survey carried out in the period of online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents (N = 221), university students of Economics (Bc. degree), often communicate in different languages on social networks. Our focus was on detecting achieved skills of students developing their plurilingual and pluricultural competences, the aim to identify elements of intercultural communication during language interaction, and the level of plurilingual and pluricultural competence among students of at least two foreign languages (ESP and another language for specific purposes). Online communication helped enhance vocabulary (idioms, phrases), fluency of speech in a foreign language and gain knowledge of respondents' foreign language communication partners' cultures and countries.

Keywords: ESP (English for Specific Purposes), communication in foreign languages, multilingualism, plurilingualism, plurilingual and pluricultural competence, social networks, translanguaging

1 Introduction

In the technological era, determined by social media, where information flows across networks and where people convey information through their further contacts, whom one knows is having a direct impact on what one knows, (according to Boyd D., 2017: 267). This is also an inevitable part of networking on social networking sites for plurilingualism. Whom the language users know, also determines their efficacy of foreign language acquisition from their mutual multilanguage communication, when being in touch on social networks.

We should realize, that social networks are an inspiration and an incentive way to increasingly modify the process of foreign language education about social networks and their possible use in teaching, obtaining information from these popular communication platforms to improve the didactic process. One of the ways to put the following into practice is to introduce greater use of social platforms by teachers as well.

As pointed out by Sánchez-Pérez and Salaberri (2007) from the University of Almeria in Spain, support for education in the field of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism is for higher education teachers needed to develop pedagogical staff's skills. They have designed the training program "Finding resources for teaching in English and enhancing student involvement and participation (Business Administration)" (Module 5: Resources and Strategies.), which can be considered the right way and a challenge to achieve this goal.

2 Research and Methodology

2.1 Theoretical background

The linguistic notion of plurilingualism refers to an individual's ability to use more than two languages. This linguistic and cultural phenomenon can therefore also be called multilingualism. In practice, this phenomenon is most often manifested by the ability of an individual to move smoothly in communication from one to another and yet another language. Plurilingualism also benefits from the coexistence of knowledge of several languages, while positively influencing each other. For example, the use of some phrases and comparisons specific to one language can sometimes even be successfully transposed into communication in a different language.

In contrast, multilingualism (including multilingualism or collective multilingualism), which differs from plurilingualism, represents knowledge of several languages i.e., the coexistence of different languages in a given society (SERR, 2006 In:

Habrmanová, S., 2017). Thus, multilingualism focuses not only strictly on an individual, but also on the group/society as a whole.

Although a vast majority of teachers, before the Corona crisis 2019-2020, were using social media in their personal and professional lives, fewer than one in five (18%) were implementing it into their instruction. Ironically, almost half (47%), believed that it could enhance learning (K-12 Teachers, 2014 In: Powers, K., and Green, M., 2016: 135).

Information literacy, (according to Boyd D., 2017: 266), does not lie merely in acquiring technical skills on how to get information, but also in experience, which provides clues, where to search for information, in the art of knowledge to interpret the available data and in skills to put particular information into context.

2.2 The characteristics of the sample

1. Gender

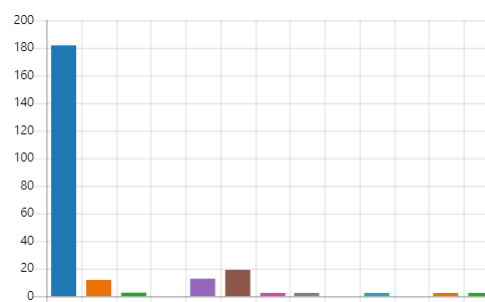
The whole sample (N= 221) consists of 156 female participants, which represents 71% of the whole research cohort, and 65 male participants, which represents 29% of the whole research cohort.

2. Age category

As the majority of the specimen were students of the first, bachelor's degree at the University of Economics in Bratislava, studying ESP as a foreign language, the main part of which – 77% – 171 respondents fit into the age category of 20 – 25 years old. The rest – 22% – 48 belonging to the 15 – 19 years old category.

3. Mother tongue

When searching for the respondents' mother tongue (native language), they were given 13 various options, including the option of *another mother tongue* to indicate a different one than the predefined 13 options of native languages, to pick from. As we can see in Graph 1, the majority of respondents indicate to have the Slovak language as their mother tongue – 82%. Then there are respondents with the Ukrainian native language in the second place – 9% and the Russian language as their mother tongue in the third place – 6%, this is due to many students from Ukraine and Russia completing their studies in Slovakia.



Graph 1: Native language of probands

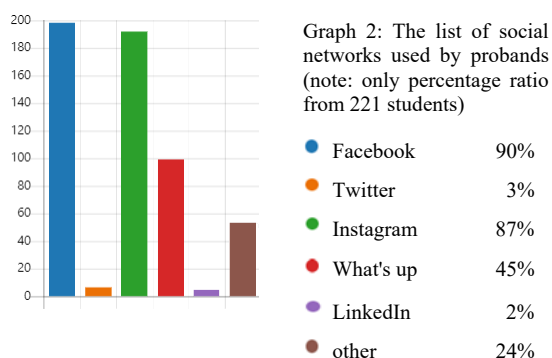
● Slovakian	182	82%
● Hungarian	12	5%
● Czech	2	1%
● Ruthenian	0	0%
● Russian	13	6%
● Ukrainian	19	9%
● German	1	1%

● British English	1	1%
● American English	0	0%
● Chinese	1	1%
● Croatian	0	0%
● Serbian	1	1%
● other	1	1%

Note, that there are respondents with the Hungarian native language in the fourth place – 5%, which is surprisingly low for the amount of the Hungarian national minority living in the south-eastern part of Slovakia taking into account the total percentage i.e. about 9% of Hungarians in Slovakia (ŠÚ SR, 2021).

4. Which social networks do you use to communicate?

Here you can see the responses to the inquiry on which social networks the respondents use to communicate. The option *other* means they use also any other social networks for communication (Badoo, Clubhouse, Discord, Messenger, Reddit, Snapchat, Telegram, Threema, TikTok, Twitch, Viber, Vk.com, Vkontakte, WeChat, Weverse, etc.).



2.3 Methodology

The main purpose of the survey has been to find out the usage of various languages in terms of plurilingual and pluricultural competence when communicating with partners on various social networks.

Our survey of plurilingualism on social networks has been performed on the specimen of 221 students (N= 221) of the first degree (bachelor's degree) of university studies at faculties with economic specialization (the University of Economics in Bratislava, the Slovak Republic). The survey was administered anonymously.

The research has been accomplished online in January, February, and March 2021. The questionnaire consists of 17 multiple-choice questions, from which four questions searched for nominal information about the category of respondents (gender, age, type of study, mother tongue, etc.). The second part of the survey, which consists of 13 inquiries, was aimed at *searching for the native language, active or passive knowledge of various languages, and the usage of special phrases as well as at detecting possible communication breakdowns of respondents. The survey aimed to find out if the partners in communication on social networks were somehow mutually enriched in terms of multicultural competence, i.e. if the respondents gained any information about the country or culture of their foreign language partner or friend on social networks. All responses were consequently evaluated as a percentage by looking at the whole set of respondents.*

3 Results of the questionnaire survey

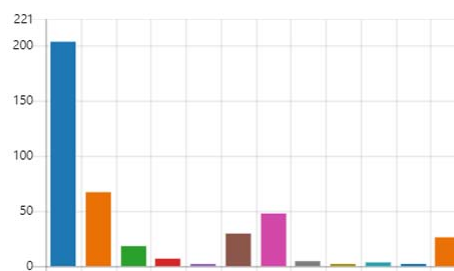
3.1 Summary and analysis of the statistical data obtained from the answers to each question in the questionnaire

In the following section of the paper, we provide the reader with a general overview of the answers to the questions from the questionnaire that were already more specifically related to the topic under study, namely the answers to Q. No. 5 up to No. 8 were focused on the main part of our inquiry and exploration of the core of our topic, which was the inquiry into the progress or improvement of the ability to use multilingualism. The phenomenon that occurs in such communication is about enriching respondents with knowledge of each of the languages used and then applying it, taking aspects of one language and transferring them to the other, improving plurilingual and pluricultural competences and skills.

By focusing our perspective on the answers to some of the questions, we analysed them separately but we also sought to gain an overall insight into contextual and logical connections between the particular questions' results and their mutual impacts. Based on the analysis of the responses, we were able to formulate some basic statements and conclusions that emerged from the results of the questionnaire and survey.

Question No. 5. What languages do you use to communicate on social networks except for your mother tongue?

The great majority of inquired respondents 92% – 203 use the English language except their mother tongue to communicate on social networks, we can state, that the English language is still more and more the lingua franca also in the new online era of communication. In the second place, the respondents use, except their native language on social networks, the German language 30% – 67, etc. The inquired respondents could have chosen more options at once.



Graph 3: The languages used to communicate on social networks by respondents

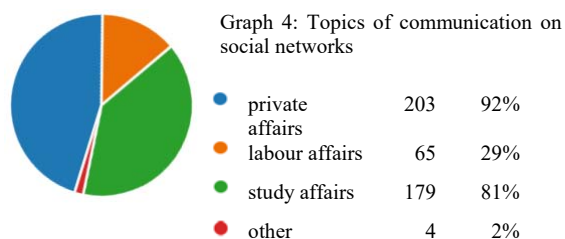
● English	203	92%
● German	67	30%
● Spanish	18	8%
● French	7	3%
● Italian	1	0%
● Russian	30	14%
● Czech	48	22%
● Hungarian	4	2%
● Croatian	1	0%
● Serbian	3	1%
● Chinese	1	0%
● other	27	12%

We found that within the surveyed population (N = 221), 39% (87 respondents) use two languages in addition to their own mother tongue to communicate on social media. Another 4% of

the respondents (9 respondents) use up to three languages for their communication on social networking sites, four languages are used by 2% (5 respondents), and two more people from the surveyed students, i.e. 0.9% (2 respondents), use as many as five additional languages besides their mother tongue for communication.

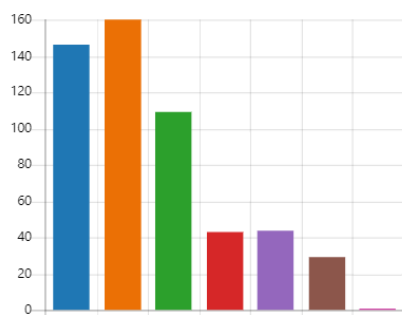
Hence, the above shows that most of the respondents use at least two different languages other than their mother tongue to communicate on social networking sites. However, the use of four or five different languages is quite rare.

Question No. 6. When communicating on social networks, you mainly communicate about...



Question No. 7. In case you use a foreign language used in another country to communicate via a social network or networks, this use of a foreign language on the social network has helped you with...

The responses to the inquiry, if a foreign language used in another country to communicate via a social network or networks has helped respondents indicate, that 72% – 160 of all received responses state, that the usage of a foreign language on social networks enriched the personal vocabulary in a used foreign language by respondents, 66% – 146 of all received responses state, that the usage of a foreign language on social networks improved the respondents' communication skills – the fluency of speech in the used foreign language, 49% – 109 of all received responses state, that the usage of a foreign language on social networks got the respondents to know some slang and colloquial expressions, that they would not learn otherwise. 20% – 44 of all received responses state, that the usage of a foreign language on social networks helped the respondents gain knowledge of the culture of the country where the mentioned foreign language is used. 19% – 43 of all received responses state, that the usage of a foreign language on social networks got the respondents to know some idiomatic twists used in a foreign language.



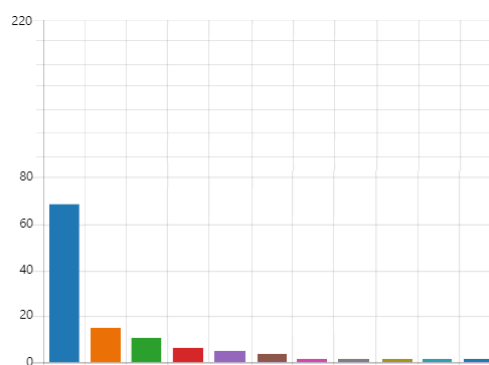
Graph 5a: How using a foreign language on social networks helped the respondents

- improve your communication skills - fluency of speech in this foreign language - indicate in which language 146 66%
- enrich your vocabulary in a foreign language, indicate in which language... 160 72%
- get to know some slang and colloquial 109 49%

expressions, that you would not learn otherwise, and indicate which language it is

- get to know some idiomatic twists used in a foreign language such as an English idiom: "Don't count your chickens before they are hatched." which corresponds to the Slovak saying: „Nekrič hop, kým nepreskočíš.“... 43 19%
- gain knowledge of the culture of the country where the mentioned foreign language is used. Indicate the foreign language and the country 44 20%
- obtain information on the social and political situation in the country. Indicate the country and the language you used.... 29 13%
- Other 1 0%

This chart is based on the analysis of a restricted sample (84 respondents) who indicated the language about which they learned something new, mainly the vocabulary or idioms, or some facts about the culture and civilization of the country where this language is used. The aim here was to find out by communication in which language or languages, the respondents improved their skills or expanded their scope of linguistic knowledge.



Graph 5b: Foreign languages in which the respondents improved their skills (based on a limited sample of 84 respondents who provided the required data)

- English 69 82%
- German 15 18%
- Slovak 11 13%
- Russian 6 7%
- French 4 5%
- Spanish 3 4%
- Czech 1 1%
- Japanese 1 1%
- Serbian 1 1%
- Italian 1 1%
- Turkish 1 1%

(Note: all options are from the sample N = 84)

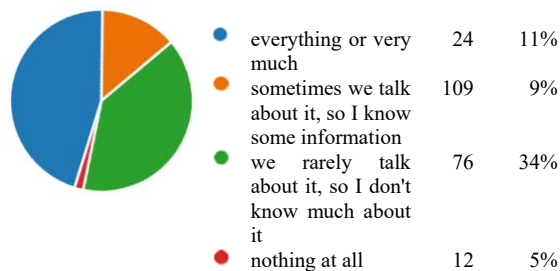
Question No. 8. How much information did you learn from your foreign language friends about their country

We can state that 49% – 109 of all inquired respondents know some information about the country of their foreign language communication partners on social networks because they sometimes talk about it on social networks, and 34% – 76 of all inquired respondents do not know much about the country of

their foreign language communication partners on social networks because they rarely talk about it, 11% – 24 of all inquired respondents know very much about the country of their foreign language communication partners on social networks and 5% – 12 of all inquired respondents know nothing at all about the country of their foreign language communication partners on social networks.

From the results, it can be summarized that students learn some information about their communication partners' countries from their common communication on social networks, which can be evidence of *Information literacy* as mentioned in the Introduction.

Graph 6: How much information respondents got about their foreign language friends' countries



3.2 Results and Discussion

Garcia (2009) talks about dynamic bilingualism. She argues that there is no one or more language systems that would be independent of each other (traditional bilingualism) or interdependent (Cummins, 1979), but assumes that there is only one language system, which includes all the languages spoken by the individual. This system has been called by Garcia (2009) *dynamic bilingualism*. It is based on the social and historical conditionality of languages and the continuous updating of language systems. Also, our results show that dynamic bilingualism is present in many respondents of our survey, according to No. 5 question responses, 38% (84 respondents) use two languages, their mother tongue and an additional language, to communicate on social media, either privately or for education, professional purposes, etc. Dynamic bilingualism points to *translanguaging*, which is characterized as the common use of language in bilinguals (Garcia, 2011). In practice, this means that children speak one language in the family, but communicate with parents in different languages, the radio can broadcast in another language, television in another, etc. As the use of languages is flexible, it is based on current needs. From this point of view, it is clear that translanguaging does not mean alternating / code-switching because this is based on the theory of two language systems. Translanguaging does not mean easy switching between codes. Within the communication, the bilingual individual chooses from the language repertoire the code that is just suitable and necessary for the given situation. According to Garcia and Wei (2014), translanguaging points to the fact that language is "action and practice" and the usage of both languages by bilinguals should be considered normal and not a communication error as is seen by monolingualism (Garcia, 2009; 2011).

New phrases and idiomatic twists were obtained from communication as we can see in Graph 5a. Students improved communication skills, and fluency of speech, enriched their vocabulary, and gained knowledge of the culture of their communication partner's country, where the mentioned foreign language is used. The environment of social networks allows the development of translanguaging in different periods, simulating familiar life situations with the involvement of their differently coloured emotional attitudes towards the communicated topic, which makes the conversation more attractive and encourages the speakers to engage more actively in the communication process. As a result of the above factors, assuming a constant enhancing linguistic knowledge and skills in the sense of

translanguaging, the plurilingual and pluricultural competences of the actors of multilingual communication are strengthened. This also happens in cases spiced with humour, when linguistic confusion occurs. From the above examples of idioms that the students entered in the questionnaire we select e.g. "Put your John Hancock on here, please". (i.e. sign it here, please), where the English-speaking interlocutors may be confused, if they do not know the part of American history on which the idiom is based – about an influential figure in the American Revolution, who put large and legible signature on the Declaration of Independence.

As a curiosity, and a nice example of linguistic false friends, in the Slovak and the Czech languages, the respondent replied to the question about her most favourite leguminous plants: "sudoku". The explanation of this linguistic curiosity is, that in the Slovak language the word "ľúštiť" is used in connection with the word crossword puzzle "ľúštiť krížovku" i. e. to solve a crossword puzzle. In the Czech language the word "luštěniny" stands for legumes. To unveil the funny core of this pun, the verbs "ľúštiť" (the Slovak lang.) and "luštiť" (the Czech lang.) are very similar and usually translated into the English language as to riddle or to decipher.

From these responses to question No. 7 "In case, you use a foreign language used in another country to communicate via social networks, this use of a foreign language on the social network has helped you" (Graph No. 5a), we can state, that it is a clear sign of a successful application of plurilingualism and the mutual influence of used languages, where the partners achieved better ability to communicate in a plurilingual and pluricultural way.

4 Conclusion

The online environment of social networks can support the formation of social barriers or help remove them. In this context, however, it is important to realize that the online environment often copies social structures and relationships as they are present in the offline environment. Of course, this also has an impact on the creation of pluricultural and plurilingual competence for users of several languages on social networks.

The main goal of the survey was to find out how often probands use more than two foreign languages. When communicating on social networks and how they apply their multilingual competence within the frame of plurilingualism and pluricultural competence.

Based on our survey's results, we can conclude that people who can communicate in three languages except for their mother tongue at the same time are still rather unique in everyday life.

In conclusion, we can summarize from the obtained data, that preconditions for communication with the application of plurilingual and pluricultural competences in the examined sample are definitely present. As well as there are other signs of the successful use of these two competences in an increasingly multicultural and globalized world also on social networking sites. We assume that the phenomenon of translanguaging in terms of action and practice of the usage of more languages should be more present in formal as well as informal education of foreign languages not excluding social networks.

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Primary Paper Section: A

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