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The Multilingual Reality in American Business

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**The Multilingual Reality
In American Business**

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UH 498: Honor's Thesis

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Abstract

We hear about the need for multilingualism all the time. Being in the College of Business, linguistic skills and cultural experiences are drummed into the brains of every student. However, are the benefits of multilingual skills being truly realized? Have we really been able to push into a stage of globalization where we can look past being America, the land of freedom? Let's take a look at what multilingualism looks like when it is most effective and what the best time to acquire this skill is. After focusing on multilingualism, the individual will be analyzed for the effects of multilingualism on themselves, their work, and their environment. All of this will be done within the context of focusing on facets that affect the workplace. After analyzing these two things, I will take a look at how companies are utilizing multilingualism and developing it. The goal of our discussion is to look into what the stumbling blocks for multilingualism in America have been.

Introduction

Today's world holds a multiplicity of cultures and languages; each evolving and integrating the others as globalization is being advanced by intertwining personal networks. As a result, students have arrived at a point where academia is encouraging them to acquire at least a second language. A storyline of language skills being necessary for survival has been told for the past decade or so. But who is telling this story? Academia says the business world is saying it, and the business world says that it is for and from everyone outside of America. No one is telling the whole story when it comes to language and multilingualism. Here in America, academia tells the survival story advising students on the necessity for language classes and experiences abroad. What students find out when they enter the business world is how little foreign language skills American businesses require. Academia is not wrong entirely. Multilingualism has not become a need for survival in the business world quite yet. The world is definitely moving in that direction, and business' apathetic attitude towards multilingualism is a major reason that Americans are ill prepared for true globalization. They are the reason for the failure of effective development of multilingualism in America.

Academia pushes students to spend at least two years studying a language in an environment that is not conducive to picking up any sort of decent fluency. They also push students to spend thousands of dollars on study abroad trips (Stansbury, 2013). Although these things do have a lot of beneficial applications, for the vast majority of people that participate in these activities they do not reap the benefits that are being touted by higher academic institutions. The development of these skills recommended by academia after the conclusion of these programs is very important to the maintenance of the minimal ability acquired in such a short time. Schools know when their students have studied abroad, but effective follow up programs that are necessary to help a student continue to develop are currently very rare. The approach to the teaching of foreign language requires modification across the board.

There is a common joke: "What do you call someone who speaks two languages? Bilingual. What do you call someone who speaks one language? American." American business started the generic American mindset regarding multilingualism, that it is a nifty and beneficial but unnecessary skillset. As many languages as there are across the world, English has become the *lingua franca* of the business world (Cogo and Pitzl, 2013; Ferguson, 2013; Kingsley, 2013). As a result, native English speakers, Americans in particular, tend to think that it is unnecessary to learn another language when everyone else is learning English. Subsequently, American executives are assuming that multilingual ability is unnecessary because everyone else is learning English, so they hire either a translator or local talent. In one fell swoop, they have just accomplished three things. First, they have given away jobs which an American is perfectly capable of doing. Second, they set themselves up for a lot of risk in either scenario with mistranslations, information that gets left out, or lack of proper understanding of business goals. Finally, they proved the necessity of someone being able to understand the other language. Business bears the responsibility of motivating America towards being a multilingual nation. Students in school are saying that they'll never use the language once they leave school, so they just try to get through all the foreign language requirements instead of actually trying to learn the language. Their thought process is completely acceptable because the business world has given no one any reason to think otherwise.

What is multilingualism?

One detail to keep in mind in this discussion is that bilingualism and multilingualism are not separate categories, but instead bilingualism is simply a subcategory of multilingualism. The discussion of

multilingualism needs to be viewed from two perspectives. The first perspective is that of the individual. Multilingualism of the individual analyzes both the linguistic and psycholinguistic facets. The linguistic facet looks at the actual skills of the individual, how they are acquired, and how they are developed. The psycholinguistic facet extrapolates the findings from the linguistic facet to analyze how the actual linguistic skills affect an individual's mental faculties and psychology. The second perspective is the social aspect in which historical, educational, political, and other facets are discussed (Edwards 2012). Oftentimes, the individual perspective is discussed very heavily without much consideration given to the social perspective. Yes, it is possible for any given individual to acquire multilingual skills of a certain level. However, it is misleading to leave out not only the social aspect but also any of its facets. For example, the most common aspect discussed within the social aspect is education, but a holistic discussion of all of the other facets could be much more revealing than most people realize. Multilingualism is not just about individual ability. The multilingual reality comes with a cultural understanding that is necessary for true understanding of any language.

To draw a line in the sand and say this is multilingualism is about as simple a task as getting a 5 year-old to build a functional rocket ship. There are a few things that multilingualism definitely does and does not involve. For example, most will agree that people who can say a word or two, count to ten, or just ask where the bathroom is in another language are not multilingual. On the other hand, many of us have friends who have parents who live overseas and have overheard them talking with their parents on the phone. In the midst of their conversation, you ask a question and watch as they switch flawlessly from one language to another and answer your question mid-conversation. Obviously, we went from one extreme to another. Nonetheless, the point being made is that everyone can understand what multilingualism is and is not when the facts are obvious, but not everyone necessarily has a line in the sand that delineates the point at which one crosses into being multilingual on an individual level.

From the individual perspective, multilingualism includes many characteristics. The first one is the obvious ability to speak in two or more languages with a certain level of fluency. The requirement could be placed at conversational, but there is even a variety of standards at conversational. Can you carry a conversation beyond the cliché questions and answers that every language textbook teaches? The ability to form questions and answers beyond the traditional vocabulary list is the level of fluency that should mark when a person is multilingual. Individuals must be trained to be able to move beyond the robotics of a textbook and say things freely as they want to and not be tied down by the mechanics and grammar rules. When they begin to follow the syntax of the language and think in that way naturally, that's when the language starts to really take root. This introduces the psycholinguistic facet of the individual perspective to show the importance of the connection to true fluency within the linguistic aspect. People, who speak foreign languages fluently, think in the language that they are speaking. However, oftentimes, individuals are taught in such a way that they essentially translate their mother tongue in their head into the other language to speak it. These people are typically very bashful and embarrassed about their skills because they commonly say things with some interesting syntax. This is the result of complete focus on the individual side of multilingualism in order to develop multilingual ability.

If complete focus on the individual perspective gives an incomplete picture and produces people who think they are inept, then the other perspective needs to be brought into the discussion for a complete picture. The reason that any discussion on multilingualism cannot leave out the social aspect is because true multilingualism is impossible from the individual stand point alone. Multilingualism is built from a social foundation. It was mentioned earlier that every aspect of the social perspective must be included in the discussion. However, there is a problem with the way that the social aspect is brought into the discussion though. More often than not, the only social facet that is brought into the discussion is the

education facet, even though the social perspective has many other facets that are just as important if not more important to the social perspective.

The historical factor may be the most important factor besides education. When an individual comes from a background where his family members are multilingual or has multiple languages within his or her extended family, the process of becoming multilingual is not only exponentially easier but is also facilitated in such a way that the linguistic and psycholinguistic facets of the individual perspective are trained much more naturally. They understand the cultural aspect of the language giving them the ability to use the language appropriately. The historical factor promotes multilingualism in such a natural way that it is often possible for a native level of fluency to be achieved without any accents across multiple languages. The political factor also plays a significant role. Multilingualism in the political arena occurs when a nation legislates that there are multiple national languages. This can help in terms of making a nation multilingual. However, as Edwards points out, "a country may be officially bilingual or multilingual and yet most of its citizens may fall into the monolingual basket." A good example of this is Singapore; the country has four national languages: English, Malay, Tamil, and Mandarin. You can find conversations commonly including two languages if not more. The political factor and the education factor are closely linked. In spite of its overuse in the multilingual discussion, particularly here, America still cannot find an effective methodology. Looking at the education systems across the globe, it is obvious to see that not only are many excelling in all subjects, but they are also incorporating multilingual studies in much earlier stages. As America's system of education has fallen down the rankings the common theme is that there has been very little effort to innovate. While schools systems overseas have spent years researching education methods and incorporating multilingual education, the American education system has added minimal requirements at a stage where it is far too late. In fact, China has an interesting method where they have set aside the city of Shanghai experimenting and innovating education reform before transferring it to the rest of the country. This has landed them at the top of OECD's PISA rankings in 2009 (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2009; Singmaster, 2011). When American educators recognize that multilingualism will happen when they look at holistic pictures, appropriate reform will take place that can transform the nation.

At the level of fluency to which this discussion is saying multilingualism exists, a person has to go through a significant number of experiences. The significance of these experiences at the rate which the person goes through can only change that person. The way which the person thinks, understands his environment, and communicates is affected. Even his individual culture gets changed. With all the talk surrounding cultures of countries and their morphing due to globalization, no one is talking about cultures of individuals and the morphing of those. Individuals themselves have become one of the biggest melting pots of culture. An individual person can visit, absorb, and portray a variety of cultures from a variety of places that he experiences. The culture of a person is malleable. Multilingualism is one of the main ways that individuals assimilate cultures which are not their own. Language and culture are not separable. Even English, while it is the main language of a host of countries, reflects the culture of each country in its accents, wording, and syntax. Learning a new language could and should change a person. Knowing multiple languages at a native level soon begins to mean that while they are independent of each other, they also affect the use of the others. Multilingualism can only improve an individual and prepare him for survival in a world which is growing smaller everyday as globalization slowly melts many of the harsh boundaries of old.

What does it look like?

Much time has been spent on discussions surrounding the definition of multilingualism, but how does one become multilingual? The world is full of a variety of theories and approaches towards the education and training of multilingual ability. Some are more effective than others, while there are also some that are just, plainly put, ineffective. Making an individual multilingual sounds great, but what benefits does it actually have? On an individual level, there is an increase in cognitive ability, task-switching, and communication skills. For a group, the multilingual individual brings diversity in opinions, a more understanding attitude for other people, and a greater ability to include everyone's thought processes.

When discussing multilingual development, there are a few key terms to understand. As mentioned in the beginning, multilingualism and bilingualism are not separated. Within the bilingual context, two categories are used: simultaneous bilingual acquisition and sequential bilingual education. Simultaneous bilingual acquisition is exactly what it sounds like where a child learns two languages from the time he was born. Sequential bilingual acquisition occurs when the process starts after at least 3 or 4 years of age. For sequential to be the case, a basic foundation of one language must be formed before another. Simultaneous bilingual acquisition results in an individual having two native or first languages (Montrul, 2012).

Developing multilingualism on an individual level requires a very high level of involvement from every factor in that individual's environment. The discussion on this development almost always starts with the factors of timing and education. The research on the timing disagrees on issues such as when the multilingual process should start and the timing of teaching multiple languages (Serratrice, 2012). One example of these disagreements is the critical period hypothesis for language learning. Many researchers go as far as questioning the validity of such a phenomenon, particularly for second language acquisition. The thought behind this hypothesis is that an individual is best suited to learning another language during a certain timeframe. In general, proponents of this hypothesis think that the best age is from when a baby first starts forming sounds to puberty (Vanhove, 2013). Now, the critical period hypothesis does not apply to simultaneous language acquisition, but most will agree that simultaneous language acquisition occurs within a similar period. Either way, the idea is that planned, specific timing definitely plays a factor on when language learning takes place most effectively; however, the timing and how exactly it works has yet to be determined.

In reality, the timing should not be a matter of concern. Multilingual education starts in the womb. Everyone has heard the talks about how babies hear things in the womb such as the mother's voice and any sounds made near the womb (Serratrice, 2012). We know babies begin absorbing language in the womb because they come out already familiar to at least one thing, their mother's voice. Children who grow up in houses where multiple languages are used are typically fluent in speaking those languages before they even get to a school. If this is the case, why is so much time spent on when they should start learning? In the context of formal education, it is important to allow for a dominant language, so the discussion on the timing of language education in schools is understandable. However, the timing of when a child should be introduced to another language is not important. Many parents, who want to make their children multilingual and misunderstand the process of becoming multilingual, send their child to a pre-school that offers second language education expecting that to be the solution based on these reports. The answer is not earlier education; the answer is in-house education where they become fluent before getting to school where they will learn all the formal grammar, vocabulary, and writing within the language.

Some research has looked at the concept of the heritage speaker. Studies show that immigrant families who come to America commonly lose the majority of the heritage language ability by the third generation (Edwards, 2012; Montrul, 2012). Multilingual development in America needs the trend to reverse; those who do not have a natural heritage language should be picking up a second language for their family to continue. By pushing this trend, America can begin to really become multilingual with individuals being motivated to pursue languages outside their majority and heritage languages. The process of turning America into a multilingual country would be much more successful if American society pushed for multilingual homes and families not just multilingual individuals. Children who pick up the language as a heritage speaker learn much more easily in comparison to trying to force feed them some language that they did not get to choose. Point being, instead of focusing on the timing and method of education, the focus needs to be on making the most suitable environment for students to gain and be interested in gaining multilingual ability.

Multilingualism sounds like a long arduous process. In many ways, it is, but there are long lasting benefits that come with it. On an individual level, the benefits are very noticeable. Task-switching is one area in which cognitive improvement is really evident. A person's ability to switch between simultaneous tasks when they are multilingual is significantly better than those who are monolingual (Hernandez, Martin, Barcelo, & Costa, 2013). The studies that have been done note that the time in which it takes the person to recover from one to another, the amount of information that is lost between switching, and the number of tasks which could be handled are all shorter or less for a multilingual individual compared to a monolingual individual. The cognitive processes of analysis, selective attention, and inhibition are also improved. The combination of these processes provides greater cognitive flexibility (Rooy, 2010). What this means is that an individual is capable of quicker processing and understanding along with innovative approaches and ideas. Another individual benefit of multilingualism is cognitive reserve that says that multilingualism could be a protection against dementia and other cognitive impairments (Perquin, Vaillant, Schuller, Pastore, Dartigues, Lair, & Diederich, 2013). Overall, a multilingual individual in an organization is going to bring a lot of benefits, so why is America not surging towards multilingualism?

Does it get used?

Ideally, everything above would already be in place today. However, there seems to be one major roadblock. Our focus is multilingualism in American companies. The roadblock to true multilingualism in America is our own businesses. Large, medium, or small, there is no real drive to see a truly multilingual workforce. Most multinationals deem it unnecessary as far as the North American divisions go. Obviously, many of them must have multilingual ability in their offshore divisions. Business is one of the biggest drivers of multilingual ability.

Looking back in history, the lingua franca of the day always became the business language of the times. In the past, the lingua franca was established by wars to conquer nations and establish empires. Edwards notes that "all imperial powers, directly or indirectly, made their languages attractive and sometimes necessary to conquered or colonized groups." Today is the exception; wars are no longer used to establish empires because they are no longer acceptable. As a result, what reasoning continues to establish English as the lingua franca? The remnant of leftover influence from the British Empire that played a very important role in the dissemination of English, and there is also the strong economic footing of English speaking nations, America in particular. However, this seems to be swiftly changing, and America is certainly not a nation with a general population prepared for effective communication with the world. The assumption that everyone learns English so Americans do not have to is trickled down from the business world. Unfortunately, while there is truth that everyone is learning English, not

everyone is learning English effectively. When a business person walks into an international environment without an understanding of the language on the other side, he sets himself at a distinct disadvantage. The way English is taught as second language internationally is often not separated from the local culture. As a result, what the American businessman understands to be said can often be quite different from what was meant. With many side conversations that occur during negotiations, it helps to be able to cut through and understand what is going on. Translators are also commonly used, and things are often lost in translation whether purposefully or not.

Many multinational companies and global institutions such as banks are making language policies which make one language the official organization language. In spite of that, many of these workplaces still involve multiple languages. English is the most common choice for the official company language, but many of the ones that are headquartered overseas in areas like Europe also have an official multilingual hiring policy. Walking around the offices of these companies, you will hear a multiplicity of languages. As employees communicate with each other, you have a variety of nationalities, languages, and cultures coming together. This diversity comes out in the workplace interactions, formal or informal. Within a company, there are two distinct types of communication: written and oral. Written communications are almost always done in English; other languages are used mainly when communicating with contacts outside of the organization. However, oral communication, even in formal settings such as proposals, can be done in English or in other languages (Angouri, 2013; Kingsley, 2013; Sherman & Strubell, 2013). The important thing to note is that this is a standard in workplaces around the world. In America, situations like this are an exception. In American businesses, communications in another language turn people's heads. Coworkers are both surprised and amazed to hear a colleague speak a language other than English.

With the progression of globalization, American businesses have been forced to do more and more overseas interactions. With this increase, they have taken minimal action to adjust to this changing environment. An American individual with effective multilingual skills is hired occasionally. However, the more common solution which companies are adopting is to hire talent overseas or hire translators. This makes things very problematic for various reasons. It was mentioned earlier that this practice takes jobs out of America, opens organizations up to unnecessary risk, and proves that these organizations need multilingual individuals. In the current day of economic and employment struggles, American businesses should be motivating the local talent by rewarding them with the jobs that they are sending overseas because of language skills. The decision to go with overseas talent is often motivated by cheaper labor. However, oftentimes, this decision could prove more costly. Foreign talent will definitely have the local language skills, but they may have a deficient skill level in English. This deficiency can result in two different things. First, because their English education is typically not removed from local culture, they will not be able to grasp the company culture and business approaches of the American business. Secondly, their English deficiency can cause a high probability for miscommunication and even lost information. Speaking of risks, there is another problem with local talent, especially in countries with high rates of corruption. Once employed, the individual may not always be working in your best interest. When your representative is not multilingual, he may miss out on the cues and the nuances that make the deal or make sure the deal is beneficial for the organization.

Two businessmen from very different geographic areas shared with me similar points of view on American business and its lack of application in the multilingual arena. One is a Belgian man working for an American company, and the other is a Malaysian man working for a German company. Both agree that the majority of American executives do not see any fruit in pursuing multilingual talent or pushing multilingual growth within their organization. This sets these organizations at a disadvantage, and they often have a hard time doing business in certain countries because of the lack of language skills available

to properly communicate. The gentlemen from Malaysia commented that American businesses are having a very difficult time conducting business in developing countries because the preference is to conduct business in the local language (Sherman Chong, personal communication, November 25, 2013). The only multilingual realities currently are divisions of business where the person in charge purposefully makes this happen. The gentleman from Belgium told me that that is something he practices in his own division where all the managers that he hires speak at least one other language. He did also say that he is fortunate enough to work under an owner who recognizes the need for multilingualism and thus supports it (Michael Iekeler, personal communication, November 26, 2013).

Students who are graduating from school look for just one thing, to get hired. Schools are telling them that in some cases in order to even get hired you must learn another language. The truth is that schools might be making it even harder for them to get hired. These language skills certainly make them more valuable, especially since effective language skills are not a common commodity. However, companies are not willing to pay more for these more valuable employees. In fact, in a survey conducted by CareerBuilder, only 33% of companies said they would pick a bilingual candidate over another (Stansbury, 2013). They think that the job can be done more cheaply by someone without those language skills. What our business world does not understand is that language skills to that extent do not just include communication. The thought processes and innovation those individuals bring can drastically improve the way things are done in a company and improve their business processes and profits. Also, by hiring an American with language skills, a business gains someone who understands the business culture and the way of doing business in America while being able to communicate with overseas clients. The business world is responsible for making multilingualism in America a reality.

Around the world, one common theme has already been mentioned earlier, everyone learns English. People around the world learn English because that's the global business language. The English language itself symbolizes money, opportunity, and success for many people. To say that you can speak English in some countries automatically signals to them that you are rich. Success and business pushed people to study and learn English. Research and academia has already proven that multilingualism is not only beneficial but also necessary. A multilingual world can be made, a world that will be better at communicating, understanding, and accepting each other. However, business has to be the catalyst to push multilingualism because as long as they make individuals think such a thing is unnecessary, people will not pursue or maintain those skills knowing that they will never use them or need them.

Conclusion

Our discussion has covered what multilingualism is, what multilingualism does for an individual, and what multilingualism looks like in the business world with a focus on American businesses. One thing that can be confirmed is that multilingualism is almost non-existent in American business. Organizations definitely have individuals whom they can point to and say, "there, we are multilingual". However, as discussed above, multilingualism is more than an individual effort; multilingualism is about a culture and an environment. One individual who is multilingual can help, but a whole company that is multilingual will be a force with agility and innovation. Considering how much smoother communication would be, how many more perspectives will be brought to a meeting, and how much more understanding of the heart of the business is mind blowing when consideration is given to how much potential is available. A multilingual individual has many dividends that will impact the organization he is in whether it is in his individual work or the group work and interactions.

Creating a multilingual world in America will be a process. A significant amount of reform needs to take place in regards to the education of foreign languages, but the real heart of the issue does not lie in the

method of education but in the business world's apathetic attitude towards foreign language. American business does not realize their role or the potential that they are missing out on if it was possible to have a company full of multilingual individuals. Once the business world motivates a generation to gain the skills, the ball will start rolling. Multilingualism is best fostered from the home. By making multilingualism a household practice, the education and success will fall into place. A community that builds and supports each other in pursuing multilingualism will hold each member accountable. Children will begin to automatically pick up languages as part of their everyday lives instead of the special effort that it will take people now to become multilingual. Once that happens, generation upon generation of individuals will grow up multilingual and will help America fit into the globalized context more effectively than ever before.

While writing this paper, a lot of research was done to look for a variety of information. The most difficult part of the research was that the information and data which I was looking for was not there. There has been a significant amount of research on bilingualism and multilingualism on very specific topics such as second language acquisition, bilingualism and multilingualism in children, and task switching. As you can see from the articles that were cited, these are just a few of the articles that cover these topics. All of these articles provide great research and significant insights into bilingualism and multilingualism. However, there is very little research done on some larger scale items, specifically the relationship between business and language. This is something that could use some research into. Another topic that could use more research is the process that was discussed regarding building multilingualism from the home.

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