

The Impact of the Official Language Knowledge upon the Integration of Romanian Immigrants to the UK

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Abstract

Our study tackles upon the influence that the English as a second language knowledge has upon the integration of immigrants to the UK in general, and of Romanian immigrants in particular. Actually, this fact is valid for all immigrants to the UK. The main stress of the integration aspects is on the economic one, namely what chances Romanian immigrants have to get well-paid, qualified jobs there.

Furthermore, the great merit of our study is that it draws attention upon the connection between English and integration and employment of which most Romanian immigrants to the UK are highly aware. The theoretical part of our paper is supported by facts and examples that, in some cases, depict professionally successful Romanians.

Keywords: *English as a second language knowledge, Romanian immigrants to the UK, integration.*

JEL classification: E20, E24

1. Introduction

The fact that English language knowledge is crucial for the integration of immigrants (including the Romanian ones) to the United States and the United Kingdom, respectively, is generally accepted and supported by the literature in the field (Bleakley and Chin, 2010, p. 165, Akresh *et al.*, 2014, p. 200, Crawford, 2015), although there are “few people doubting its importance for success in the labor market and its criticality for full incorporation” (Akresh *et al.*, 2014, p. 200). We are subscribing to the first category.

We also adhere to the opinion that English accelerates the process of assimilation, but it is not enough, as it represents one of the various factors that help Romanian migrants integrate in the British society: “English ability is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for assimilation” (Akresh *et al.*, 2014). On the other hand, the process of integration seems to go well as far as most European migrants are concerned and about whom we find in Glennie and Pennington (2013, p. 5) that they “integrate well with the British workforce and society”.

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2. A theoretical framework – literature review

Our focus in the present paper is the influence that English as a second language has upon the integration of Romanian immigrants in the United Kingdom, and against this background, we are paying special attention to the equation *language-integration-employment*. Little has been researched on the correspondence between English language skills and employment and integration, respectively, and one of the reasons is the lack of necessary data in this respect (Akresh *et al.*, 2014). We ourselves have been confronted with scarce statistics on this issue.

Romanians have chosen to live in various places in Britain, but many of them “have settled in the Burnt Oak suburb of London, creating a Little Romania in the area referred to as “Bontoc” by the residents”² and they are employed in sectors like: “construction, distribution, hotels and restaurants, education, health and public administration”. (Bentham, 2017)

In terms of age, Romanian migrants “are generally young, skilled workers [...] The majority of migrants from Romania are of working age: 82 % are aged between 20 and 65, and 69 % are aged between 20 and 39. A slightly higher proportion of migrants from Romania are male (52 %) than are female (48 %)” (Glennie and Pennington, 2013, p. 12).

There are lots of successful stories of Romanians that have been made popular by means of well-known British newspapers which are available worldwide as these also appear online. An example is the owner of a Romanian prosperous restaurant in London, or the famous boxer of Romanian origin George Betianu (Dugan, 2014). Although Romanians in the UK are successful, they bitterly confess that they are also aware of the Romanians’ negative image created by a part of the British press: “Articles in the right-wing press have painted a very different picture, often giving the impression that the majority are coming to Britain to steal or take benefits.” (Dugan, 2014).

People’s perception in UK is influenced by what they hear in the media in different degrees. Romanians working in the UK are aware of that, but are still cautious about using too harsh words referring to this fact: “People see us as being very driven, proactive and always keen to come up with a solution. Maybe it’s because as an immigrant you subconsciously have the need to constantly prove yourself which is perceived as highly motivated and a hard worker. I’ve never been treated differently because I’m a woman or a Romanian (or both!), but there are little subtleties sometimes where you can see that there’s still a bit of ignorance or misconception about eastern Europeans.” (says Diana Vasilescu³ in an interview

² <https://www.transfergo.com/en/blog/migrants-uk-romanian/>, accessed on October 1st, 2017.

³ “With a Bachelor’s degree in Communication Studies, Public Relations, Advertising, and Applied Communication at the Faculty of Journalism and Communication Studies, the University of Bucharest, Diana Vasilescu entered the Romanian advertising and communication scene in July 2009, at the agency Eventures. She got the first job in UK in February 2014 and has been ever since working for several important clients, such as:

(Oprea, 2016)). Nevertheless, discrimination in terms of nationality is denied by the same interviewee: “Nationality doesn’t really play a role in this, especially in London, where you come from has no leverage. It’s all about your experience, your skill set and how quickly you can adapt from project to project.” (Oprea, 2016)⁴.

3. Findings

Our research shines a spotlight on the connection between English language skills and Romanians’ chances to succeed economically in Britain as their country of residence with the various implications of such a success upon Romanian individuals and the British society that adopts them.

According to the available statistics “many Romanian migrants self-report a high level of English. Out of all the respondents who declared “Romanian” as their main language in the (2011) census 82 per cent stated that they “can speak English very well or well”” (Glennie and Pennington, 2013, p. 12), while “data from the European Labour Force Survey suggests that 60 per cent of Bulgarian and Romanian workers coming to the UK have an “intermediate” level qualification and an additional 18 per cent have a “high” level educational qualification (Rolfe *et al.*, 2013 *cited* Glennie and Pennington (2013, p. 12)).

English is not only seen as “as a pre-requisite for being “truly British”, but it also raises the chances of being hired in Britain in (very) well-paid positions: “If you can’t speak English you’re 50 per cent more likely to be unemployed, three times as likely to have no formal qualifications and if you have a job it’s most likely the lowest paid and most laborious.” (Roycroft-Davis, 2014). It is also significant to know that “immigrants with dominant language fluency have labor market and other outcomes superior to those of immigrants with limited dominant language skills” (Chiswick *et al.*, 2004).

Probably one of the most important steps towards fast English language acquisition is a psychological one, namely *acceptance*: to speak English as much as possible, even if “out of necessity”, even if the native tongue (in our case Romanian) is “to lose ground” (“As English becomes accepted out of necessity by ethnic groups as the dominant language in public spheres, the mother tongue is more and more restricted to use with social intimates, especially family members” (Fishman, 1972

Volkswagen Financial Services (Audi, Skoda, SEAT), Diageo (UK and Germany), BBC and Save the Children.” (Oprea, 2016)

⁴ As our research area includes the impact of English language knowledge in the above mentioned environment we consider that there are similarities regarding the UK and the US referring to the totally positive effect of English proficiency upon personal financial outcomes: it is what the following quotes have in common: “There is evidence that English proficiency helps immigrants integrate economically into their new home—English proficiency raises wages, narrowing the wage gap between immigrants and U.S. natives.” (Bleakley and Chin, 2010, p. 165) and “English language ability accounts for about 17 per cent of the employment gap between British-born residents and immigrants, and between 22 and 26 per cent of the wage gap.” (Crawford, 2015)

cited Alba et al., 2002, p. 469). Eventually, this may possibly lead to second or third generations speaking (almost) only English which may be frustrating for older Romanian UK residents belonging to the first generation.

We should add here that the lack of knowledge is in some connection with the immigrants' low educational background as well as with their old age. If we speak about liberal professionals (such as doctors, notaries, architects, lawyers etc.) or faculty graduates (Ivan, 2013, p. 121)⁵ the chances for these to have intermediate to high levels of English knowledge are considerable.

In terms of gender and English language knowledge, it seems that English is more problematic in the case of women migrants: "Significantly the problem is most acute among women. Overall 60 per cent of those unable to speak the national tongue are female." (Roycroft-Davis, 2014)

In the literature on migration we can also find recommendation for English language programmes that could help migrants integrate faster (Glennie and Pennington, 2013, p. 5). Some researchers perceive such programmes as being of very high importance: "There is great potential to be unlocked in ensuring that current and future migrants are able to contribute actively as citizens and find employment to the best of their abilities, with benefits that will flow to the economy and throughout society. But helping them to learn English quickly and comprehensively will be critical" (Crawford, 2015). At the same time, "further efforts are also required to support the successful integration of EU citizens who do choose to move to another member state, particularly where difficulties around language and culture arise." (Glennie and Pennington, 2013, p. 4)

Britain is, therefore, also interested in encouraging migrants by means of such programmes as "it is important that everyone is able to access and understand the UK health system – both for their own sakes and for public health reasons. [...] interpretation or translation services that relate specifically to emergency healthcare should be maintained, while translation costs could be reduced through hiring more GPs and health support workers who are proficient in the languages spoken by new migrants." (Glennie and Pennington, 2013, p. 26)

We also have to signal a very interesting finding: the general perception and conviction is that English is the globalization language. It is also a must-know language if one wants to get a better paid job either in Romania or abroad (especially the USA or UK). But according to empirical data, there are also Romanians settled in the UK that do not find it necessary. The reason why one might think this way is because they work in a Romanian speaking working environment with a Romanian boss or have Romanian-only work colleagues. Such a "linguistic self-isolation" has

⁵ Ivan (2013, p. 121) points out that in Romania: "students must study at least one language to an advanced level and a second one at a more basic level. In other cases, there are more than two foreign languages available to study and the student can choose from several. Many schools also offer bilingual courses.", and most of the times English is the top foreign language studied in Romanian universities.

its own price: no job and full dependence on social security⁶ or very poorly rewarded positions: “Without strong English language skills, large numbers of economic immigrants and refugees become concentrated in low-paid roles [...] in which many of their peers or management may also lack strong English skills. In this respect, employment may even contribute to their isolation, rather than integration.” (Crawford, 2015)

English knowledge brings benefits (such as rights protection) for the migrant employee, therefore, this should be sufficiently encouraging for Romanian immigrants to do their best at acquiring English language knowledge: “Employees who can’t speak English will also lack the essential means of accessing information about their rights or self-advocating in the workplace. As a result of low English proficiency, not only are they less able to protect themselves from exploitation, but they may not recognize that they are being exploited in the first place.” (Crawford, 2015)

On the other hand, the lack of English language knowledge triggers benefits for employers who take advantage of the situation. This reality has been signaled by Bloch and McKay (2015, p. 41): “For employers though, workers with limited language skills and restricted options as a consequence of status offer a cheap and disposable labour.”

Another question that arises here is: *How difficult may be for Romanians to learn English?* Although Romanian is a Latin language and English a Germanic one, most Romanians do not find it too difficult to learn: “English is the foreign language that most Romanians speak – 31 per cent” (Ivan, 2013, p. 120). We would dare to explain this fact by linking it to the most Romanians’ conviction that English is good to know in the actual and future economic context: “Nearly 60 per cent of Romanians believe that English is the most useful language and about 70 per cent consider that it would be most useful for their children.” (Ivan, 2013, p. 120).

Several studies have shown the connection between young age and the greater ability of learning English: the younger age, the faster the pace of acquiring this language (Birdsong, 2006, p. 9, Chiswick *et al.* 2004), even if we speak of an English speaking environment where it is supposed that the learning process is easier and shorter: “Proficiency is hypothesized to increase through contact with the host society and through interaction with members of the native population.” (Akresh *et al.*, 2014)

An objective of the highest importance for our study is to prove by means of Romanian migrants’ confessions if they perceive English as a top priority when they ask themselves the question whether they are ready to adapt and to be “adopted/accepted” by the British society. There are Romanians who are aware of the fact that English language knowledge may be decisive for the success when doing a certain job, especially well – paid ones. Here is the confession of a lawyer of Romanian origin working in London: “As a foreign lawyer it is very hard, because you have to

⁶ Roycroft-Davis (2014) puts it in a funny way: “when you arrived at Heathrow you only needed to know two words of English: social security”

speak English very well, and you have to retrain for the English legal system” (Florescu, 2007). This comes to support what Crawford (2015) also signaled in her article: “ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) courses remain heavily oversubscribed – reflecting the strong desire amongst immigrants and refugees to learn the English language and their recognition of its importance”. And we think that the Romanian lawyer’s above cited words can be extrapolated to all the liberal professions that Romanians have in the UK, taking into account the specific characteristics that each and every job has in terms of English vocabulary and British legislation.

4. Conclusions

The present study has tried to bring arguments regarding the importance of English language knowledge for Romanian migrants in the U.K. Generally, graduate Romanians are aware of the advantage due to their English language abilities, the most motivating factors being better-paid jobs and a faster integration in the British society.

We also admit the fact that the present research has its own limitations. The next stage of this research consists of interviewing several Romanian immigrants who are UK residents in order to find out authentic stories meant to give some real pulse of these people’s linguistic and work experiences there.

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