2016 'YEAR OF ENGLISH': Better English language skills will help reduce Russian influence

Emphasis on English will boost Ukraine’s international outsourcing appeal and help next generation of business leaders build bridges with wider world



English is the most popular foreign language in Ukraine where most people are bilingual

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President Poroshenko has declared 2016 ‘The Year of English Language in Ukraine’. Despite the somewhat Soviet-sounding terminology, this initiative could actually have a major impact on the country. If done correctly, it could kick-start processes that will positively affect Ukraine’s business climate, attracting a range of outsourcing businesses to the country while providing a huge boost to the tourism industry and allowing Ukrainians to build business bridges across the EU and beyond.

**Material benefits of better English**

English language skills are a prerequisite in the globalized world, and this is particularly true in the outsourcing industry. With the service sector accounting for an increasingly large portion of the global economy, Ukraine could flourish as an outsourcing option. It has a highly skilled and well educated but inexpensive workforce, while being close enough to mainstream Europe to avoid any major cultural barriers. However, levels of English language proficiency still lag behind standards in many neighboring European countries.

This state of affairs is particularly evident in the otherwise booming Ukrainian IT sector. Ukraine’s IT companies are currently leading the country’s emergence as an outsourcing destination, winning an international reputation for excellence combined with economic attractiveness. Nevertheless, much of the country’s best programming talent still struggles to meet the English language requirements of the industry. IT companies often find themselves forced to conduct language classes, while those engaged in fostering the next generation of IT professionals are obliged to spend time focusing on rudimentary English training. There is clearly room for significant improvement.

Ukraine’s tourism industry would also benefit from better English language skills. The use of the Cyrillic alphabet can serve to alienate visitors to the country, making Ukraine seem more inaccessible than it really is. There are huge opportunities for Ukrainian cities like Lviv, Odesa and Kyiv to grow as city break destinations. Better English language skills will translate into better service, a warmer welcome, and a more comfortable stay. The result will be positive reviews and repeat visits. Niche areas such as medical tourism also underperform due to the relatively low levels of English language proficiency among many Ukrainian professionals.

Outsourcing and tourism would be two specific beneficiaries of better English language skills, but they are far from the only sectors of the economy with an interest in the issue. The business climate in general would gain enormously from greater English fluency. With Ukrainian companies looking to capitalize of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, communication will become an increasingly important factor. Language can play a significant role in breaking down barriers and helping Ukrainian companies reach out beyond the traditional Russian language comfort zone of the CIS.

**TV subtitles can lead to English language breakthrough**

According to President Poroshenko’s announcement, ‘The Year of English Language in Ukraine’ will involve a series of initiatives including making it easier for native English speakers to work in Ukraine, testing the proficiency of the country’s language teachers, offering training to civil servants, and encouraging Ukrainian participation in international programmes designed to boost language skills.

By far the most important element of the programme is the proposal to broadcast English language educational content on Ukrainian TV and screen English language movies with subtitles instead of dubbing. This simple but effective step is one of the key reasons for the excellent English language skills in many of Europe’s English language leaders.

The Scandinavians and Dutch are the continent’s most fluent English speakers. It is no coincidence that these nations tend to favour subtitles. They typically broadcast large volumes of English-language TV content in the original language. In central and eastern Europe, countries such as Croatia have experienced a similar improvement in English language skills via the broadcast of subtitled English language TV content.

The challenge now is to persuade Ukraine’s media owners to get behind the initiative and begin broadcasting subtitled English language content on a regular basis. Supply should certainly not be an issue. There is no shortage of quality material available on the international market.

The shift would also offer social dividends. A move towards English content would help to break the continued stranglehold enjoyed by Russian TV serials and movies on Ukrainian TV.

Inevitably, there will be resistance from some Ukrainian TV viewers – particularly among older audiences. This would likely mean an initial dip in ratings for any channels embracing the idea of more English language programming. The quality of the content on offer should eventually suffice to balance out any sense of awkwardness felt by Ukrainian audiences, but much will depend on the willingness of channel owners to get behind the English language initiative.

If there is sufficient media support, it could end up changing Ukraine in a meaningful way. One year will not be enough to transform the linguistic abilities of the nation, but it could introduce some positive trends that have the potential to open up the economy and integrate the population into the wider European community. After years of divisive and damaging linguistic debates, this might finally be a language policy capable of bringing benefits to the vast majority of Ukrainians