

World News

Spanish say yes to language class

MADRID

With stalled economy, learning English viewed as crucial to finding work

BY RAPHAEL MINDER

Facing high unemployment at home, more Spaniards are seeking work abroad. But they are confronting a significant hurdle: their poor foreign-language skills, in particular a lack of English.

With a 20 percent unemployment rate, twice the European average, labor mobility has become a burning issue in Spain, prompting some business leaders to call for an overhaul of the Spanish education system that would make better language training a priority.

Enlío Cuatrecasas, chairman of Cuatrecasas, one of the biggest Spanish law firms, said recently that "Spain has to take seriously the need to reform its education, particularly in terms of teaching English."

There are early suggestions that the next generation will have sufficient communications skills to work outside Spain: More children are now being taught by English speakers as part of their regular class work. At the same time, more adults are playing catch-up, notably trying to learn German to respond to employment offers in Germany, which has the largest economy in Europe.

One place where educational changes are under way is Madrid. A program run by the regional government has made about a third of primary state schools bilingual. The government expects to raise that proportion to half by 2015.

On a recent morning at the Rosa Luxemburgo school in the district of Moncloa-Aravaca, 10-year-olds were studying the human body in English, learning terms like "salivary glands" and "esophagus." One of them, Macarena Ferrán, said that she also got to practice English regularly while vacationing abroad, last summer in the Netherlands. As to her long-term ambition, "I would like to live in New York because it looks like a very interesting city," she said in almost flawless English.

For the current generation of Spanish job-seekers, however, working in New York might be more of a distant dream. While there are no reliable comparative statistics, language-school owners like Richard Vaughan even argue that "the level of English is lower than 15 years ago," reflecting a general decline in education standards in Spain.

Mr. Vaughan, a Texan who moved to Spain in the 1970s, now runs Vaughan Systems, the largest English language teaching company in Spain. He estimated that "fewer than 5 percent of the students graduating from schools of engineering, law or business possess a working knowledge of English."

Madrid's bilingual program, however, is giving the region's politicians something to gloat about.

"This is a major step," said Lucía Figar, who oversees the regional gov-

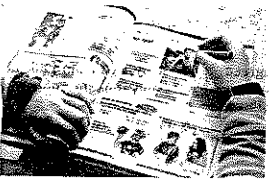


Fifth-graders learning English at the Rosa Luxemburgo school in Madrid, where teachers can earn a bonus by teaching a foreign language.

ernment's education policy. "Until very recently, getting to a decent level of English was simply impossible for any child whose parents didn't have the money to send their child abroad or to a private school."

The bilingual schools rely largely on Spanish teachers who get a monthly bonus of €180, about \$255, for making the language switch. The schools also have recruited assistants who are native English speakers — often Americans on an extended university break or sent to Spain through an education scholarship like the Fulbright program.

Between 30 percent and 50 percent of the class work is in English, including



Pupils sharing a workbook in Madrid.

the science that was being taught last week at the Rosa Luxemburgo school.

In another classroom, Felipe Alejandro Luna Merlo, an 8-year-old whose parents emigrated from Bolivia, was finding it more difficult to assimilate human anatomy in English, and struggling to understand general questions about his upbringing. Still, he sounded eager to progress, saying that he was also teaching his father, a waiter, how to say

"the numbers and the colors" in English because "I really want him to learn like me."

One of the teachers, Fernando Azpeitia, had spent three years in Chicago at a transitional school teaching Latino children. He welcomed the enthusiasm among his Madrid pupils. "The big advantage here is that parents have chosen to have their children learn English," he said, "while in Chicago it was kind of compulsory."

Whether the children always get to hear the Queen's English is debatable, however, and even Ms. Figar acknowledges that some teachers could improve their own English. Still, she said, more than 90 percent of the children have so far completed their bilingual primary school program by passing English language tests set by Cambridge University.

"These tests are the best way to measure our success, rather than discussing whether some teachers have good grammar but poor pronunciation," she said.

Ms. Figar also described as "absurd" the criticism directed last year at a €1.8 million Madrid advertising campaign to promote bilingual education. English purists said the slogan for the campaign — "Yes, we want!" — amounted to a grammatical error because a direct object should have followed the verb. "This was only about powerful advertising," Ms. Figar said. When Apple promotes its consumer electronics, she added, "nobody questions whether their slogan should be 'Think positive' or 'Think positively!'"

In collaboration with the Spanish Education Ministry, the British Council,

Britain's cultural agency, also runs a bilingual project in more than 200 schools, alongside similar initiatives in Italy and Portugal. Raising English standards in Spain "isn't an overnight happening," said Teresa Reilly, a British Council official. Still, compared with Portugal and Italy, "Spain is considerably ahead in the introduction and development of solid subject-based teaching in English

Spanish workers have "no other option."

in the primary and secondary sectors," she said.

The economic crisis is also forcing more adult Spaniards to return to the classroom — and not just to learn English. Applications to learn German this spring semester have risen 15 percent from a year ago, according to the Madrid office of the Goethe-Institut, which promotes German culture abroad. That follows a recent recruitment initiative by the German government to add about 500,000 engineers from other countries to keep its economy growing.

Meanwhile, Miguel Flor de Lima, who teaches the Portuguese language in Madrid, said that a growing number of multinational corporations were cutting back marketing and other activities in Spain and Portugal, two of the most crippled economies in Europe.

"The crisis means that more companies are treating Spain and Portugal as a single Iberian market and then asking their people to adjust to that," he said. "And that leaves employees with no other option than trying to master both languages."

Russia hits separatists and issues a warning

MOSCOW

BY MICHAEL SCHWITZ AND ELLEN BARRY

A day after an unusual air attack on what officials here said was a militant base in Russia's mostly Muslim North Caucasus region, President Dmitri A. Medvedev warned separatist fighters there to surrender or "be destroyed."

Speaking on the anniversary of a suicide attack on the Moscow subway that killed 40 people, Mr. Medvedev asserted that the Islamist militant groups almost always responsible for such attacks were still active, and he ordered the Russian security services to finish them off. "We need to do this and bring this work to an end," he said.

Russia has been battling Muslim separatists in the North Caucasus for nearly two decades with limited success. Violence occurs almost daily there and attacks in Moscow and elsewhere are not uncommon.

Mr. Medvedev said the assault Monday had delivered "sufficiently impressive results" against what he called a terrorist base.

The attack, carried out in a wooded area of Ingushetia near the border with Chechnya, was remarkable in its scale and frequency.

At least 17 people the government said were insurgents were killed when the Russian Air Force bombarded the area, officials said.

It was unclear whether fighter jets or helicopters were used. Three members of Russia's security services were killed.

Russia has rarely used air power against militants in recent years, said Tatyana Lokshina, who researches the North Caucasus with Human Rights Watch, in New York.

"It's a huge operation by Russian standards," Ms. Lokshina said, though she cautioned that the effectiveness of such assaults can be difficult to gauge.

Russian officials said they were still determining whether the operation had accomplished Moscow's aims.

"Among the dead militants there should be the leaders of militant groups," said Nikolai Simsov, a spokesman for the National Anti-Terrorist Committee. "At the moment, an investigation is under way to determine the identities of the dead criminals."

Separately, Russia's Investigative Committee on Tuesday released new details about two brothers who have been arrested and charged with accompanying the suicide bomber who killed 35 people in January at Domodedovo Airport, which serves Moscow.

The authorities announced the arrest of the brothers, Islam and Ilez Yandiyev, on Monday. The Investigative Committee asserted that the brothers were carrying a suicide belt and two bombs when they were arrested.

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