

FRENCH LANGUAGE AND CULTURE & COMPETITIVENESS IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

ABSTRACT

This sub-project is part of a larger study with the over-arching theme, "Language and Competitiveness: Positioning Trinidad and Tobago for Sustainable Development." It examines French language, culture and competitiveness and the value placed on French linguistic skills and expertise in the workplace, as perceived by self-identified plurilinguists.

Grin et al (2013) found that there are linkages between linguistic and economic dimensions and that foreign language skills are not only profitable for the individual worker, but can serve the performance of the firm and of an economy as a whole. Nordstrom & Vahlne (1992) observed that psychic distance in international business, is often caused by the lack of foreign language skills which prevents the flow of information between potential or actual suppliers and customers. Feely & Harzing (2002, p. 7) posit that there is increasing evidence of 'linguistic nationalism' with buyers, clients or stakeholders across the world asserting their rights to do business in the customer's language. Reporting Neal's (1998) study of foreign (French) companies, Feely & Harzing found that parent-company managers working in UK subsidiaries identified language problems as a major source of frustration, dissatisfaction and friction between them and their UK colleagues. They noted that for many of these managers the language barrier compounded their sense of being outsiders. In her study of 2,500 alumni of the Thunderbird School of International Management who graduated from 1970 and 2002, Grosse (2004, p. 351), found that of the 581 respondents, 82% gained a competitive advantage in business from their foreign language skills and even more, 89%, received an edge from their knowledge of other cultures. She admits that although competitive advantage is difficult to quantify, many Thunderbird alumni defined in specific terms the edge that foreign languages and cultures had given them in their careers.

Phenomenology, as a paradigm, underpins this study, which uses a mixed design to collect data. With this approach this project hopes to, reveal what is "unknown, known thinly, known uncertainly, or known wrongly" so as to "produce one or more of many imagined and as yet unimagined outcomes" (Peshkin, 1993, p.23), about the pecuniary, social, promotional and other values that competence in and knowledge of the French language and culture accrue to the citizens

of Trinidad and Tobago. This study adds to the intellectual capital of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago by bringing to the fore the importance of French to the country's workforce and development which has often been overlooked by policy makers and other enablers in the country.

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