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**Universitat Autònoma  
de Barcelona**

**Language and Access to Work:  
The Role of English in Recruiting**

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## Abstract

The present dissertation is an ethnographic study that looks at the role of English skills in access to junior- and senior-level jobs in Barcelona. It focuses on the internal operations of recruitment agencies and examines the rationale behind their construction of the English skills criteria for open positions, as well as the way recruiters carry out screening and evaluation of English skills during the recruitment process. English skills are the *sine qua non* of modern work, they are an asset for companies and an indispensable work tool. The Spanish labour force however, is known to lack the high level of English required by businesses that offer new jobs in the Spanish job market. As the Spanish economy continues to be internationalized, both public and corporate discourses keep insisting that Spanish workers need to improve their English skills.

Recruitment agencies are labour market intermediaries whose main commitment is to finding the best profile of worker for the companies that hire them. They develop mechanisms of selection that predict candidate fit, and this allows these agencies to thrive in a highly competitive business environment. This thesis shows how recruitment agencies have inflated the English requirement by requiring spoken English for jobs that do not actually need it. As the Spanish labour market is experiencing an excess supply of available workers due to high unemployment, English skills are operationalized by recruitment agencies as a *résumé* screening tool. Furthermore, the evaluation of candidates' English skills is carried out by means of oral conversations, in which fluency is the main indicator of a candidate's language competence. This parameter is highly problematic and it opens space for recruiters' subjective biases. The Spanish workers who invest in acquiring English skills are often unable to reach a level that would be sufficient to pass such an evaluation. Recruitment agencies have established a selection pattern based on the English skills requirement, which has negative consequences for Spanish workers who are having difficulty in accessing jobs. This requirement is only exacerbating inequalities inherent to the Spanish labour market.

## Resumen

La presente tesis es un estudio etnográfico que analiza el papel de los conocimientos de inglés en el acceso a puestos de trabajo de nivel junior y senior en Barcelona. Se centra en las operaciones internas de las agencias de contratación y examina la lógica que subyace a su construcción de criterios de conocimientos de inglés para los puestos vacantes, así como el modo en que los reclutadores llevan a cabo la selección y evaluación de los conocimientos de inglés durante el proceso de selección. Los conocimientos de inglés son la condición *sine qua non* del trabajo moderno, son un activo para las empresas y una herramienta de trabajo indispensable. Sin embargo, se sabe que los trabajadores cualificados españoles carecen del alto nivel de inglés requerido por las empresas que ofrecen nuevos puestos de trabajo en el mercado laboral español. A medida que la economía española sigue internacionalizándose, tanto el discurso público como el empresarial siguen insistiendo en la necesidad de que los trabajadores españoles mejoren su competencia lingüística de inglés.

Las agencias de contratación son intermediarios del mercado laboral cuyo principal compromiso es encontrar el mejor perfil de trabajador para las empresas que los contratan. Desarrollan mecanismos de selección que predicen el perfil de candidato más idóneo, lo que permite a estas agencias prosperar en un entorno empresarial altamente competitivo. Esta tesis muestra cómo las agencias de contratación han inflado el requisito de inglés exigiendo un inglés hablado para trabajos que en realidad no lo necesitan. Dado que el mercado laboral español experimenta un exceso de oferta de trabajadores disponibles debido a la elevada tasa de desempleo, las agencias de contratación utilizan los conocimientos de inglés como herramienta de selección de currículos. Además, la evaluación de los conocimientos de inglés de los candidatos se realiza mediante conversaciones orales, en las que la fluidez es el principal indicador de la competencia lingüística del candidato. Este parámetro es muy problemático y abre espacio a los sesgos subjetivos de los reclutadores. Los trabajadores españoles que invierten en adquirir conocimientos de inglés se ven a menudo incapaces de alcanzar un nivel que sea suficiente para superar dicha evaluación. Las agencias de contratación han establecido un patrón de selección basado en el requisito de conocimientos de inglés, lo que tiene consecuencias negativas para los trabajadores españoles, que tienen dificultades para acceder a los puestos de trabajo. Este requisito lingüístico no hace más que agravar las desigualdades existentes en el mercado laboral español.

## Resum

La present tesi és un estudi etnogràfic que analitza el paper dels coneixements d'anglès a l'accés a llocs de treball de nivell júnior i sènior a Barcelona. Se centra en les operacions internes de les agències de contractació i examina la lògica subjacent a la seva construcció de criteris de coneixements d'anglès per als llocs vacants, així com la manera com els reclutadors duen a terme la selecció i avaluació dels coneixements de anglès durant el procés de selecció. Els coneixements d'anglès són la condició *sine qua non* de la feina moderna, són un actiu per a les empreses i una eina de treball indispensable. Tot i això, se sap que els treballadors qualificats espanyols no tenen l'alt nivell d'anglès requerit per les empreses que ofereixen nous llocs de treball al mercat laboral espanyol. A mesura que l'economia espanyola es continua internacionalitzant, tant el discurs públic com l'empresarial continuen insistint en la necessitat que els treballadors espanyols millorin la competència lingüística d'anglès.

Les agències de contractació són intermediaris del mercat laboral el principal compromís de les quals és trobar el millor perfil de treballador per a les empreses que els contracten. Desenvolupen mecanismes de selecció que prediuen el perfil de candidat més idoni, la qual cosa que permet a aquestes agències prosperar en un entorn empresarial altament competitiu. Aquesta tesi mostra com les agències de contractació han inflat el requisit d'anglès exigint un anglès parlat per a feines que en realitat no ho necessiten. Atès que el mercat laboral espanyol experimenta un excés d'oferta de treballadors disponibles a causa de l'elevada taxa de desocupació, les agències de contractació utilitzen els coneixements d'anglès com a eina de selecció de currículums. A més, l'avaluació dels coneixements d'anglès dels candidats es fa mitjançant converses orals, en què la fluïdesa és el principal indicador de la competència lingüística del candidat. Aquest paràmetre és molt problemàtic i obre espai als biaixos subjectius dels reclutadors. Els treballadors espanyols que inverteixen a adquirir coneixements d'anglès sovint es veuen incapaços d'assolir un nivell suficient per superar aquesta avaluació. Les agències de contractació han establert un patró de selecció basat en el requisit de coneixements d'anglès, fet que té conseqüències negatives per als treballadors espanyols, que tenen dificultats per accedir als llocs de treball. Aquest requisit lingüístic no fa més que agreujar les desigualtats existents al mercat laboral espanyol.

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## Introduction

Human capital is what companies value most. Paradoxically, an increasing number of jobs and work projects come with a fixed end date. Looking for a job is an activity we now undertake every so often, even though most of our parents and grandparents have had a single job for life (Gershon, 2017). Our generation lives in a reality where jobs are not guaranteed by the state, our education, private companies, or our own skill set. The factors that define one's success at finding a job are in constant transition, so we have to keep an eye on them not to lag behind.

This thesis is about job recruitment, a process comprised of the activities that lead to hiring and acquiring a job (Barber, 1998). More specifically, it is about the recruitment agencies and recruiters, who are in charge of selection processes for junior- and senior-level jobs, which are designed to single-out the candidate with the appropriate set of skills. This skill set is determined by the time in which we live and the things that we value. The topic of recruitment came to my attention in light of the difficulties that many people face when attempting to access work in Spain. After the 2008 crisis, many people found themselves unemployed, including young people and workers with university degrees. Those who were employed did not always have stable jobs. At that time, discourses that linked English skills to job opportunities were emerging in the press and in public discourse. The main idea transmitted was that people in Spain needed English skills for work, but that they lacked this ability, which was and is required for the contemporary labour market. Contingency of work upon such skills has the potential to further complicate jobs reality for the Spanish population.

Workers with English skills are what companies want to invest in. It is quite easy to understand the importance of English skills in the workplace as it has become the *sine qua non* of highly qualified work. English proficiency is a resource with an exchange value, a tool employed to achieve specific work-related goals (Robichaud and Schutter, 2012). The utility of English and other language skills is never subject to doubt, rather, it is taken for granted. Moreover, the idea that languages are economic assets is promulgated by scholars who work on the economics of language and who measure the usefulness of language in-companies' productivity and efficiency (Grin, Sfreddo, and Vaillancourt, 2010; Grin 2003). Additionally, corporate learning organizations create

discourses in which English skills present a gap to be filled. These activities and practices reflect the complex processes that can also be described as the entanglements of English (Pennycook, 2021). The “entanglements of English” refer to the many levels on which English is promoted through policies, practices and discourses which reinforce its hegemonic position in the world. English is not just useful in the context of work-related tasks, but it has also become neoliberally instrumental (Urciuoli, 2019), which means that it is imagined as an essential trait for a qualified employee because of the opportunities it promises. It has become an index of the ideal worker.

Knowledge of English in Spain is varied, but it is considered insufficient, especially when compared to other European countries. In the recent years, Spain has seen initiatives, such as CLIL and a minimum language requirement for university graduates, that were set in motion in order to improve the notoriously poor English language instruction provided by public schools and the university education system. This issue is framed as a national shortcoming with a flavour of self-deprecation (Park, 2016; Codó, 2021). The Spanish population has and still relies on private institutions, such as private bilingual schools (Sunyol, 2019) and language academies, in order to develop their English skills that are now not just required on the job, but also for access to jobs.

Recruitment agencies are the private organizations where the better jobs are found. They work in a highly competitive context where offering the best candidate is the logic that helps their business to thrive. Essentially, they are only an intermediary, or a mediating party (Finlay and Coverdill, 2002) between companies looking for employees and job-seekers. However, they have managed to position themselves as an indispensable service to companies seeking to employ the best, most qualified human capital in the established and often tight time frames, and as a service that opens up job opportunities for individuals seeking work. Recruitment agencies have become the sites that guard access to and distribute a scarce resource – jobs.

The recruitment model of selection constitutes the competency-based evaluation blended with the neoliberal soft skills approach (Roberts, 2021; Urciuoli, 2019). It also includes the use of job performance predictors by recruiters—who treat certain skills as indicators that help them to identify the best candidates (Viswesvaran and Ones, 2010: 177)—and the automated tools that transform decision-making into a matter of machine data processing (Rivera, 2020). Criteria for selection are typically less regulated

in the neoliberal labour markets, and they are a subject to change along with the labour market conditions. Thus, new criteria might emerge out of the imbalances between the supply and demand of the labour force (Bryson, James, and Keep, 2012). The recruitment agencies, in applying selection criteria that do not necessarily match the requirements of the jobs, may produce new inequalities (Roberts, 2021) and limit access to jobs for particular kinds of job-seekers. Recruitment agencies are also participants in the conversation about what kinds of skills improve one's chances to get a job in Spain. According to the information produced by recruitment agencies, English has been reported to improve candidates' employability. The reality of recruitment is also complex because of the large number of job-seekers in the qualified job sector.

An ethnographic study into the role of language skills in recruitment has a potential to show how recruitment agencies take up the English language skills requirement and construct hiring practices around it, converting it into a key determinant in access to junior- and senior-level qualified employment in Barcelona<sup>1</sup>, Spain, where finding a job is difficult. By looking into how English proficiency is measured with respect to other requirements and how it is used to screen candidates, it is possible to uncover its importance in the selection process. Furthermore, the consequences for Spanish job-seekers and for the Spanish labour market can be identified based on information about the jobs and why English skills are required.

The questions of inequality and language in recruitment have been approached from the perspective of migrant and minority populations and studied in mainly public unemployment contexts through the lens of job interviews (Roberts, 2013; Pájaro, 2018) or unemployment activities directed towards professional reinsertion of workers (Flubacher, Duchêne, and Coray, 2018). The processes of the elite and class reproduction have been documented in recruitment processes by Rivera (2016) and Park (2011), who have found out that recruitment parameters are often set in order to keep access to better jobs limited to a particular group of society. In the case of the study by Park (2011), change in the English language skills evaluation method was evidence for the class reproduction process. This dissertation contributes to the existing

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<sup>1</sup> These junior- and senior-level workers will be herein referred to as "highly qualified professionals". This terminology encompasses the university-educated professionals and the workers with professional training who comprise the participants of this study.

body of work on recruitment and the role language skills play in the systems of inequality, by unpacking how the English skills requirement is constructed by recruiters at two private recruitment agencies in Barcelona, Spain. Also, this dissertation shows how these recruiters create structures where English skills are used to screen candidates, and how they use English as a negotiation tool in order to close deals and make profit. The area of sociolinguistics of English in Spain has not previously addressed recruitment contexts, and this thesis is an attempt to start a conversation on the key role language plays in access to work and, thus, to contribute to the field of critical sociolinguistics that investigates processes in which language creates unequal conditions for people in Spain (Moyer, 2018; Codó, 2021; Pujolar 2020; Sunyol 2019; Sunyol and Codó, 2020).

This sociolinguistic ethnographic study looks into the practices of two private recruitment agencies, where I followed the everyday recruitment practices with a focus on the English requirement present in the selection process of different stages. These included (1) the creation of the job offer, (2) its publication on the webpage of the recruitment agency, (3) the screening of candidates' curriculum vitae, (4) phone-screening, and (5) the job interviews. I have been able to gain an insight into how English has become part of a selection pattern by carrying out various research activities at recruitment agencies. They include observations of recruitment routines, short conversations with recruiters about their approach to language skills criteria, semi-structured interviews with both candidates and recruiters, job interview observations, along with the collection of candidates' curriculum vitae and job offers.

This thesis is organized in seven chapters. **Chapter One**, *The Spanish Labour Market and English Skills*, provides background on the Spanish labour market and the employment context, which help to unpack the processes that shape the current conditions of access to work. It also presents the recruitment agencies and the information on the English skills requirement they provide in the labour market reports. Finally, the national media, corporate, and political discourse on English skills in Spain is overviewed.

**Chapter Two**, *Research Questions*, sets forth the questions that address the recruitment practices of the two private recruitment agencies, in order to identify the

consequences that these practices, that implement and carry out the English language skills assessment, entail for the Spanish job-seekers.

**Chapter Three**, *Theoretical Framework: Language Skills, Access to Work and Recruitment*, looks into the concepts that provide an understanding about how language became an economic asset, how it is used or imagined as a work instrument, and how it is framed as central in access to work. Also, theoretical information on recruitment, recruitment agencies, and their important role in the distribution of the better job opportunities is presented, as well as the mechanisms of selection, the recruitment agenda, and the approach to language evaluation.

**Chapter Four**, *Methods*, explains the research design and methodological choices made throughout the research. It provides the details about access to sites, the steps taken and the decisions made, and the informants who played a key role in access. Further on, the information on the sites is presented along with an overview of the data generated. This chapter also includes my own positionality and reflexivity as a researcher and an overview of the formal ethical procedures.

**Chapters Five, Six and Seven** are dedicated to the analysis of the data. Each chapter addresses the questions posed in the *Research Questions* chapter. **Chapter Five** looks into the value of English and other language skills in recruitment. **Chapter Six** offers the perspective of the recruiter on the selection process. It also analyses how English requirement is implemented at each selection stage and explores the meaning of the recruitment practices associated with the English requirement. **Chapter Seven** offers the candidates' perspective on recruitment through the portrayal of their lived recruitment experiences and their struggles in finding employment opportunities. It also tells the stories of four candidates whose job opportunities were affected by the English skills requirement.

Finally, *Conclusions* summarize the main arguments discussed in the analysis section and the implications of the English requirement for access to work in Barcelona, Spain. Future lines of research are discussed.



## **Chapter 1 The Spanish Labour Market and English Skills**

The present chapter provides the context for this study. The Spanish labour market and its functioning, having been affected by global economic processes, are fundamental for understanding the role of language skills for employment in the more localized context of recruitment in Barcelona, in the autonomous region of Catalonia, Spain. The global processes of the labour markets and the economic approach to skills provide a lens through which the Spanish and Catalan labour markets are explored. The existing conditions of the labour market—along with the discourses on English skills created by the state, the media, and the recruitment agencies—sustain the neoliberal work order under which English becomes a requisite for access to jobs.

### **1.1 Labour market inequalities and skills**

The language criteria imposed on job-seekers are linked to the functioning of the labour market. The labour market is a social structure, shaped by material conditions and regulated by the government. It is also a site where employment is negotiated; therefore, it is where the distribution of resources, namely jobs, takes place (Kraft, 2017). Kalleberg and Sorensen (1979) define the labour market as “the arenas in which workers exchange their labour power in return for wages, status and other job rewards”. The concept also refers to the institutions and practices that are in charge of the purchase, sale and pricing of labour services. As well, it includes the rules that regulate employment, mobility, and the acquisition of skills and training (Kalleberg and Sorensen 1979: 351).

Labour markets are studied from different perspectives that include inequalities created by income difference, job security and prestige, labour groups segmentation, and career mobility (Kalleberg and Sorensen 1979). Changes in labour markets are caused by a series of influences, such as global and local economic activity, and technological development. Global networks of production and consumption in the service sector, the expansion of capital (Duchêne and Heller 2012a: 9), and the specific features of a given country—such as the availability of labour force—impact what new firms emerge and which old ones disappear, producing a continuous change (Junankar 2016: 29) in the job market. Multinational companies that establish their business in the countries of their choice retain a specific role in shaping the availability of jobs.

Income disparity is a type of inequality inherent in any labour market, which is typically balanced out by social redistribution. Wealth is redistributed through the intervention of the state, more particularly through taxation, fiscal transfers to workers with lower incomes, education policies, minimum wages, prevention of employment discrimination, and union growth (Piketty, 2014). Differences in contractual relationships also create and reinforce inequalities among different groups of workers. Contracts can be permanent, temporary, or part-time. They offer different modes of work engagement, job security, social benefits, training, and career opportunities. Some workers may be excluded from the labour market altogether. There is an understanding among the economists that 1-5% unemployment is considered natural or “perfect” (Piketty, 2014: 48). “Inequalities with respect to employment, a fundamental feature of contemporary inequality”, as put by Piketty (2014: 48), are hard to measure because labour market statistics tend to exclude such factors as hidden underemployment, or they overlook the distinct ways in which different countries calculate active population. It then becomes hard to estimate how many employed people are seeking better work opportunities. This affects projections as to how many jobs the economy has to be generating in order to occupy the workforce, and it can lead to imbalances in the labour market with respect to employment.

Workers’ skills also play a role in what kinds of inequalities take place in a given labour market. Jobs are understood in terms of workers’ skills because they denote productivity; that is, they “generate a performance” (OECD, 2019b: 99). This understanding of skills is used in the labour markets to match workers to their jobs. Skills feature in the job announcements and in candidates’ CVs, and they include a broad spectrum of a person’s abilities and personal traits that are useful for carrying out specific work-related tasks.

The demand for certain skills is a subject to change. For instance, technologization increases the demand for a generally more skilled workforce (Junankar, 2015: 2). During recessions employers can be “choosier and hire workers who have better skills or qualifications, leaving people with fewer skills unemployed” (Junankar, 2015: 6). Skills receive a certain value in the labour market, and they can shape how particular groups of people are viewed with reference to productivity, while discriminating against less productive groups of people by denying them employment (Junankar, 2015: 4).

Recessions also cause structural changes in the labour markets. New types of jobs become available, and they require a distinct skill set in post-recession economies that unemployed workers do not have. As a result, job-seekers are unable to find employment because of the mismatch between their skills and the new job requirements. The skills mismatch may result in long-term unemployment (Cazes, Verick, and al Hussami, 2013: 12).

## **1.2 Unemployment in Spain**

English has become a valuable skill that enhances one's chances of getting hired for junior and senior level jobs in the complex labour market of Spain, which has been battling high unemployment as a result of the 2008 crisis. The demand for English skills is related to the specific labour market conditions, to the kinds of jobs available, to the tasks it allows workers to perform, and to the ways in which recruitment firms carry out their practices to match people with jobs. Tracing the labour market tendencies historically up to the present day is essential to understanding how the current employment context has created the conditions in which English skills play such an important role in access to work.

High unemployment is a recurring phenomenon in Spain. The lowest records of unemployment date back to 1965-74 when it was at 1.5%. In those times, under the Franco regime, people used to have low-paid low-skilled jobs for life that protected them from economic shifts. The productivity of the economy was low, and the labour market was rigid, or heavily regulated. Between 1977-86, unemployment rose to 12% and since then it has had upward and downward tendencies, peaking at 24.2% in 1994 (Harrison and Corkill, 2004: 144) and at 26.1% (Idescat, 2021) in 2013. While always remaining high, the lowest level of 8.5% was recorded in 2006 before the international crisis of 2008 (Idescat, 2021). These high unemployment numbers reveal the complex state of the Spanish labour market over time and it can be explained by political, economic, and demographic processes.

**Table 1.2**  
Unemployment in Spain 1965-2002

1965-74	1.5	1993	22.7	1998	18.8
1977-86	12.0	1994	24.2	1999	15.9
1986-90	18.4	1995	22.9	2000	14.1
1991	16.3	1996	22.9	2001	13.1
1992	18.4	1997	20.8	2002	11.7e

Source: Harrison and Corkill (2004: 144)

In the late 1970 to 1980s, an international financial crisis and recession occurred. It corroded employment in manufacturing and the industrial sector. The economy was undergoing a transformation in which production and agriculture were being replaced by the service economy, which accounted for almost 40% of the Spanish economy in 1975 and had grown to 67,5% by 1998 (Harrison and Corkill, 2004). The recession motivated the government to undertake five labour market reforms, thus introducing the temporary, fixed-term and part-time employment contracts between the 1980s and 2006 (Congregado et al., 2011: 1100). The labour market was also shaken by the 25% increase in the Spanish labour force that occurred when women and baby-boomers joined between 1960s and 1990s (Harrison and Corkill, 2004: 149). This resulted in an inability to provide enough jobs for the people seeking employment.

In the 1980s, technological progress, globalisation, and labour market reforms promoted other forms of work: temporary and part-time. The number of fixed-term contracts grew to make up 25% of the market and contributed to unemployment volatility into the present day. This also created a dual labour market labour, which is characterized by the split between two job sectors with distinct working conditions (Bentolila et al., 2012: 2). The primary sector offers jobs with relatively high wages, good working conditions, career prospects and job security, while the secondary sector offers low-paying jobs with poorer working conditions, few career growth opportunities, job instability, and high labour force turnover (Piore, 1975: 126). In Spain, this labour market duality was the result of the Spanish government's dual approach to employment protection legislation, where severance pay for fixed-term contracts was liberalized and, as a result differed substantially from that of permanent contracts. This resulted in the growth in fixed-term contracts (Bentolila et al., 2012: 7). The employment rate grew

until the European recession of 1992-1993, which destroyed the Spanish job market again in 1994.

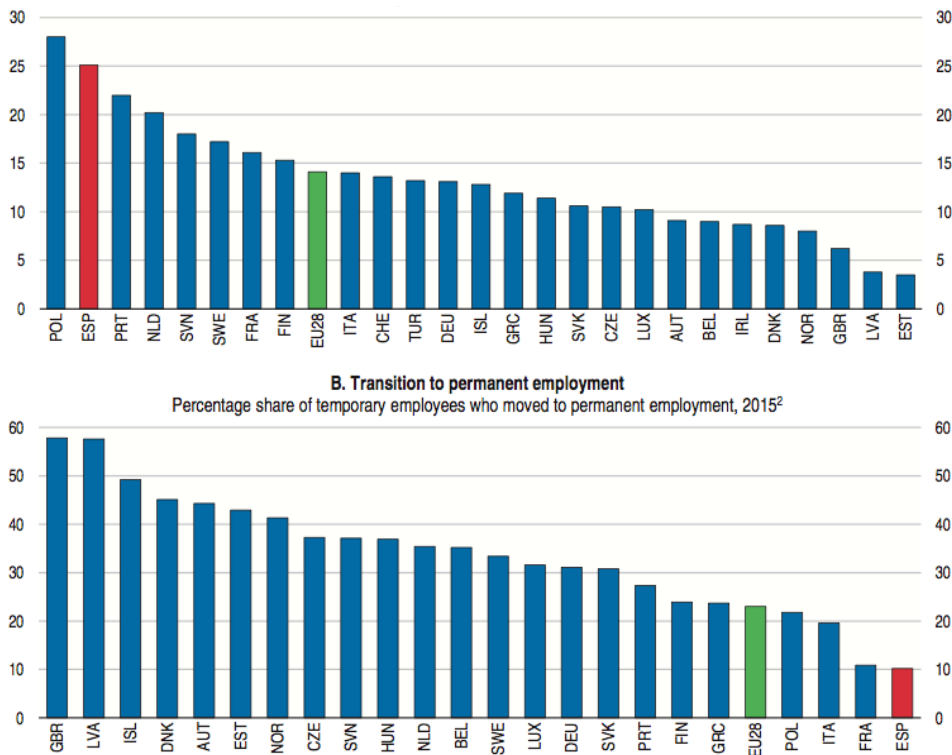
The economic growth from 1995 to 2006 and from 2000 to 2006 was achieved through labour-intensive industries such as construction, tourism and personal services (Bentolila et al., 2012). This was accompanied by migration inflow, which changed the demographics of Spain once again. Dualism of the labour market, financial deficit, and the need for external financing grew as Spain accumulated debt in the private sector (Bentolila et al., 2012: 4). This had negative economic and employment consequences for Spain and made it vulnerable to the effects of the 2008 crisis. The unemployment surge was caused to the destruction of jobs in the construction sector and the destruction of temporary jobs that did not have enough social protection (Cazes, Verick, and al Hussami, 2013: 15), however, other sectors were heavily affected too. According to Cazes, Verick, and al Hussami (2013: 10), increasing productivity and more working hours per worker also may have led firms to fire workers between 2008 and 2009.

The effects that the financial crisis had on permanent and temporary contracts were different, since those were the temporary contracts that were lost between 2007 and 2011. However, further reforms in 2010 and 2011 did not tackle the divide in the labour market. The 2012 labour market reform partly addressed this problem, but the recommendation received in 2014 to further reduce severance pay for permanent contracts—which would reduce the difference between permanent and temporary contracts—was still not implemented in 2017 (OECD, 2017a).

Starting in 2014, the Spanish economy was in recovery and new jobs started emerging. However, the labour market was characterized by low productivity, lack of innovative business investment, poor job quality (in terms of earnings) and high unemployment, including long-term unemployment (47.8% in 2016), as well as a high percentage of temporary contracts (25%) with a very low transition into permanent contracts (60% of net employment growth has been through temporary contracts). Part-time work represented 15.2% of the contracts in 2016, with more than half (63%) of these contracts being involuntary part-time employment, which means that the workers were forced to accept part-time work conditions (as compared to the OECD average of 17.4%).

**Figure 1.2**

Share of Temporary Employment and Transition to Permanent Employment



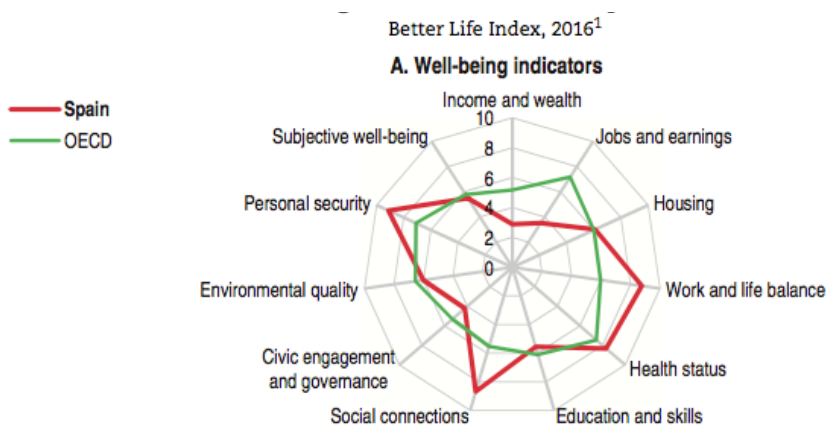
Source: OECD (2017: 34)

In comparison to other OECD countries, Spain has been doing quite poorly in terms of job quality, which includes labour market security and the low quality of work environments, which leads to poor productivity outcomes. Labour market insecurity was the second highest among the OECD countries in 2013. It included the risk of job loss, the duration of unemployment and fewer possibilities of finding a job after being unemployed for longer spans of time. This exacerbated income inequality (OECD, 2017a).

The large number of fixed-term contracts creates high turnover in some sectors and makes employees vulnerable to economic change; when companies start reducing costs due to economic downturns, they get rid of the workers who are least protected by the labour legislation first. On the other hand, the permanent contracts that have collective bargaining and offer protections in the form of severance pay still keep the labour market rigid in comparison to countries such as Denmark, which uses the flexicurity model where costs of hiring and firing are low but the workers are protected by unemployment insurance (Carrasco and Ejrnæs, 2012: 4).

The labour market contract conditions are also more favourable to large, high-productivity firms, which can do their own bargaining and keep their salary levels higher than collective agreements. Smaller firms have more limits with regards to collective bargaining and, therefore, are less likely to grow because of the existing contract models (Bentolila et al., 2012). This prevents the Spanish economy from growing and adds to its low productivity, since small and medium firms represent a large portion of business in Spain and in Catalonia. Various market regulations also prevent them from internationalizing (Ministerio de Trabajo y Economía Social, 2020: 101). These regulations restrict the scope of business innovation and competition in professional services, legal, architecture, engineering and accounting (OECD, 2017a), also inhibiting the creation of qualified jobs.

**Figure 1.3**  
Life Index Spain



Source: OECD (2017a: 16)

The dual contract nature in Spain (Cabrales, Doblado, and Mora, 2013) has affected the development of workers' skills in Spain, negatively impacting their employability (OECD, 2017b). This process is rooted in the past and it affects the quality of the labour force that is much needed for the growing knowledge-intensive economy. According to the Bertelsmann Foundation (2002, 3), in the 1990s, investment in on-the-job training was 40% lower than in the rest of the EU, resulting in skill mismatches—either over- or underqualification of workers in relation to available employment. In 2006, Spanish firms managed to provide training to 40% of their permanent staff while only 24% of

temporary workers received training. Bentolila et al. (2012) argues that temporary contracts and poor on-the-job training destroyed chances of a professional career for many workers who were in their thirties and forties, and it added to their job insecurity. According to OECD (2017b), the professional skills of university graduates in Spain are comparable to those of secondary education graduates in some of the other OECD countries. At the same time, a large number of university graduates are overqualified for the jobs they currently occupy. There has been a mismatch reported between the quality of university education and the demands of the labour market: “training in Spanish universities offers little adjustment to the professional profiles demanded by today’s society” (Caballero, Vázquez, Quintás, 2015: 398).

According to the Spanish labour market report (Ministerio de Trabajo y Economía Social, 2020: 101), it is necessary to improve on-the-job training programs by making them more flexible and by adapting their content to match the new requirements of the labour market. There exists a gap between the jobs that cannot be covered due to the lack of employees that match the job requirements, and the high number of people who cannot find jobs because they lack the skills that are in demand. The positions that are especially hard to cover are those produced by the digital economy. There is also a general consensus about the “deficit of language competencies, mainly English, but also other languages” (Id.) for qualified jobs. These gaps are the consequence of what the post-crisis economy looks like in Spain; available jobs are in the growing sector of digital economy, even though the workers are not trained for these kinds of jobs. The generation of workers over forty years of age are especially affected by the structural unemployment that is related to the mismatches between their training and the jobs on offer.

The requirement for English is important for qualified jobs in the Spanish labour market. This includes jobs that need at least post-secondary education or a university degree, where unemployment is still relatively high. According to the OECD (Table 1.4), in 2015 there was a 21.6% unemployment in population with postsecondary non-tertiary education, (as compared to 8.1% in 2007), and 13.2% unemployment in the population with tertiary education (as compared to 5.3% in 2007). Especially negative were job conditions for young people, aged between 15 and 29 who were not in education, employment or training. Among them, non-tertiary and tertiary



unemployment was at 45% and 35.9% respectively (as compared to 16.5% and 13.4% in 2007).

**Table 1.4**  
Labour Market Indicators Spain and OECD

	Spain		OECD	
	2007	2015	2007	2015
Employment/population ratio	66.8	58.7	66.5	66.3
Labour force participation rate	72.8	75.5	70.5	71.3
Unemployment rate	8.3	22.2	5.8	7.0
of which long-term unemployment (> 1 year)	20.4	51.6	28.4	33.8
Youth (15-24)	18.1	48.3	12.0	14.0
Prime age (25-54)	7.2	20.6	4.9	6.2
Older population (55-64)	6.0	18.6	4.0	4.9
Men	6.5	23.7	5.6	7.5
Women	10.7	25.5	6.1	7.6
Lower secondary or less	10.5	31.0		
Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary	8.1	21.6		
Tertiary	5.3	13.2		
Youth:				
Lower secondary or less	20.4	56.3		
Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary	16.5	45.0		
Tertiary	13.4	35.9		
Youth "not in education, employment, or training" NEET rate (15-29) <sup>1</sup>	15.9	22.7	13.5	14.6

1. Unweighted OECD average for the Youth NEET rate, instead of the OECD total.

Source: Jin, Caldera-Sánchez, and Garcia-Perea (2017: 9)

Table 1.5 shows the evolution of unemployment in Barcelona province and Catalonia, which followed the same increase and decrease patterns as that of the rest of Spain while being 2-4% lower than the average Spanish unemployment.

**Table 1.5**  
Unemployment Rate Comparison Catalonia, Barcelona Province and Spain

Year	Catalonia	Barcelona province	Spain
2020	12.6	12.5	15.5
2019	11.0	10.9	14.1
2018	11.5	11.1	15.3
2017	13.4	13.1	17.2
2016	15.7	15.5	19.6
2015	18.6	18.2	22.1
2014	20.3	20.0	24.4

<b>Year</b>	<b>Catalonia</b>	<b>Barcelona province</b>	<b>Spain</b>
2013	23.1	23.1	26.1
2012	22.5	22.5	24.8
2011	19.2	19.1	21.4
2010	17.7	17.7	19.9
2009	16.2	16.2	17.9
2008	8.9	8.6	11.3

Source: Idescat (2021)

In order to show the full picture of the Catalan labour market and the labour market in Barcelona, further information on the employed and the unemployed in Barcelona and Catalonia is provided. Also, the account of companies that produce jobs in the region is presented. The population of the autonomous region of Catalonia totalled 7,496,276 people which accounted for 16.1% of the Spanish population in 2017. Barcelona province is the largest province of Catalonia in terms of population and it totals 5,533,459 people. Unemployment figures in Catalonia typically approximate the unemployment scene in the northern regions of Spain, which are lower than those of the southern regions.

The active population of Catalonia, which includes the working and the unemployed, totalled 3.7 million people in 2017, out of which 3.2 million people were employed and 507 thousand people were unemployed. Out of the people who were employed, 559 thousand people were on a job for less than one year, 526 thousand people were employed between one and three years, and 2.2 million people were on a job for more than three years. Out of the 2.7 million salaried workers, 2.3 million were employed in the private sector while the rest of the employees worked in the public sector. 2.2 million employees had an indefinite contract, and 592 thousand had a temporary contract. Thus, over two million people in Catalonia had stable jobs, while over one million and a half were either looking for work, recently changed jobs or were on temporary contracts.

Out of the unemployed population (507 thousand people), approximately half had been looking for a job for more than one year. Also, 342 thousand unemployed people were aged between 25 and 54, while 81 thousand people were aged over 55. The province of Barcelona had 367 thousand people unemployed in 2017, while registered

unemployment in the metropolitan area of Barcelona amounted to 265 thousand people (out of the 4,786,697 residents). In Barcelonès County (it hosts a population of 2,226,828 million people) there were 116 thousand unemployed people. The Barcelonès area includes the city of Barcelona and the four towns in the immediate surroundings of the city, which together are typically referred to as Barcelona. There is no visible border between the Barcelona city and these towns (the statistical data is taken from Idescat, 2021).

Table 1.6 shows the numbers of people who have higher education and are in registered unemployment in Barcelonès County and the metropolitan area of Barcelona. Thus, approximately 20% of all people in registered unemployment had higher education in the Barcelonès area and the metropolitan area of Barcelona. These were the people that would potentially face the English skills requirement when looking for jobs, as well as the people who were already employed but looking for more stable working conditions.

**Table 1.6**  
Registered Unemployment. Higher Education in the Barcelonès Area and the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona

<b>Year</b>	<b>Barcelonès Professional Training</b>	<b>Barcelonès 1<sup>st</sup> cycle</b>	<b>Barcelonès 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle</b>	<b>Barcelonès Total Unemployed</b>
2019	7,575.5	2,808.8	10,823.1	106,469.6
2018	7,570.9	2,951.5	10,564.3	109,837.4
2017	7,892	3,330	10,597	116,381
	Metropolitan area Professional training	Metropolitan area 1 <sup>st</sup> cycle	Metropolitan area 2 <sup>nd</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> cycle	Metropolitan area Total Unemployed
2019	16,882.4	5,512.8	18,452.6	240,588.3
2018	16,677.3	5,792.7	17,682.2	247,810.8
2017	17,517	6,429	17,785	264,947

Source: Idescat (2019b)

Catalonia is the fourth largest economy of Spain, although it grew a bit slower than the Spanish economy in the years 2018-2019 (EURES, 2021). In the year 2017, there were 619 thousand companies active in Catalonia, mainly including small and medium-

sized companies, with over 80% of them involved in the service sector. Over half of all companies have no paid workers, one quarter of all firms have two or three workers, while less than 5% of all companies have more than ten workers (EURES, 2021; Idescat 2019a). Wholesale and retail trade account for one quarter of these businesses (EURES, 2021). Tourism accounts for around 12% of the Catalan GDP (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2021).

Currently, there are 8,908 foreign multinational companies in Catalonia. By contrast, in the year 2013, there were 5,602 companies, which means that the presence of multinational companies has almost doubled over a period of five years. These companies are predominantly French, German, American, Italian, British and Dutch. An important 16% percent of these companies belongs to the growing technological sector, which includes the fields of information technology, industry 4.0, biotechnology, electronics, health and medical equipment, and smart cities, among others (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2021). These companies were attracted to Barcelona as a result of internationalisation and direct investment initiative programs implemented by the state and the Catalan government in order to create jobs and improve the economy.

According to the labour market report for Barcelona, (Servicio Público de Empleo Estatal, 2020), language skills are required for jobs in public administration, ICT and Commerce. They are clearly important for the digital economy, which includes ICT companies, but also for companies in other sectors that are implementing digitalization. In Barcelona, these digital sectors are: ICT, Media and Communication, Firm Services, Production, Finance, and Other (Barcelona Digital Talent, 2020). In Barcelona, there are 36 professionals available for every published job offer, while there are 15 professionals available for every published job offer in the digital economy. However, one third of all professionals that currently occupy the recently available positions in the digital economy are represented by the globally mobile workforce (Barcelona Digital Talent, 2020).

### **1.3 Recruitment scene and English skills**

The economic transformations in Spain and in Barcelona have led to the emergence of a particular kind of jobs and a requirement for English that is linked to these jobs. The high rate of unemployment has also raised interest in the language competencies,

because in the conditions where there are no jobs, English has become the main competency considered important for job opportunities at home and abroad (Moyer, 2018).

Recruitment agencies have become an important player in the transformation of the labour market, since they are responsible for providing access to new jobs. Private recruitment agencies also mediate access to a pool of applicants, saving many companies from the task of finding human resources for their businesses. Campos et al. (2014) states that the job search in Spain is making more use of the available online platforms. Between 2008 and 2011 employers and job-seekers increased their searches online (firms increased from 17.7% in 2008 to 20.% in 2011 and job-seekers increased their searches from 21.5% to 25.2%) while the number of job offers posted decreased drastically (Campos et al., 2014: 1098). The available platforms where one could apply for a job can belong to the private recruitment agencies, but they can also be independent platforms, where recruiters post job offers and where candidates upload their curriculum vitae (CV henceforth).

Due to the development of specific job application platforms, job searches and job recruitment processes have changed – they have become faster and easier for employers, but not necessarily for job-seekers in the conditions where the economy is not providing enough jobs. The information available on the candidates is also more detailed and the pools of candidates have become larger (Campos et al., 2014: 1095). At the same time, recruitment agencies that have their own online job application platforms, have acknowledged that they receive a high volume of applications and that not all applications meet the professional qualifications they are seeking, which complicates screening (Campos et al., 2014: 1098).

Private recruitment agencies, called “agencias de colocación” in Spain, carry out their labour intermediation activities autonomously but in coordination, or formal cooperation with the public employment system (Real Decreto Legislativo 3/2015). The information on these agencies is integrated into the national public employment system for equal access to employment opportunities. The employment law (Ley 18/2014) has modified the rule that regulated the activity of these agencies to guarantee the market unity, which means that recruitment agencies can begin to offer their services without the obligation to obtain an administrative authorization. This procedure has been

simplified and replaced by an obligation to submit a declaration of responsibility, as a measure to combat the grave employment situation, particularly youth unemployment, and it was implemented by the government in order to stimulate employment and job creation (Ley 18/2014). According to the national employment system, Sistema Nacional de Empleo (2021), 1,824 public and private agencies and unemployment offices in Spain, and 227 offices in Catalonia provide labour intermediation services. Private recruitment agencies have to guarantee free services for job-seekers. Also, they are obligated to provide information about their activities, such as job offers, professional profiles that match these offers, and the information about the job-seekers they have met with. They also have to guarantee equal access to employment with no direct or indirect discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, age, marital status, or the official languages, among others (Real Decreto Legislativo 3/2015).

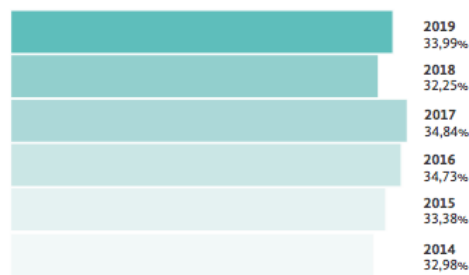
Private recruitment agencies have an active role in shaping the labour market, since they assign value to certain skills, and therefore, may promote a demand for the skills they use for their selection practices. English and other language skills have become the subject of various publications by private recruitment firms, which insist on the labour market deficit in this skill and link it to employability. These publications made the front pages of the national media, thus reinforcing the original message that English is an important requirement not just for the emerging qualified jobs, but also for the *possibility* of being employed; that is, to improve one's employability.

An article published by Randstad (2017), and reprinted by La Vanguardia stated that "knowledge of languages improves chances of finding a job by 37%", which makes it the competency with the biggest impact on employment success. The article states that 26% of all the job offers come with a requirement for English, while other language skills are also reported make a difference in a recruitment process. RRHH Press claims (RRHH Press, 2021), that 70% of better remunerated job posts and jobs with responsibility come with a requirement for English. In the year 2018, English was the most required skill in all the published job posts, and recruitment agencies were admitted to evaluating English proficiency as a general practice.

According to Adecco (2019), a prestigious recruitment firm that elaborates annual labour market reports, for the past eight years, English skills are claimed to be "increasingly more present in the general requirements list that candidates have to

comply with in order to be able to opt for a job post” (Adecco, 2019: 178). However, statistics on the number of jobs that require the knowledge of a second or third language—, 90% of which require English, reveal that the growth is not so drastic. Rather, the following table shows that since the year 2014, between 32% and 34% of all the jobs in Spain have required language skills (Adecco, 2019: 179):

**Figure 1.7**  
Job Postings With Language Skills in Spain



Source: Adecco (2019: 179)

Solé and Alarcón (2001) looked into the role of official state languages, Spanish and Catalan, in Catalonia, as well as that of foreign languages in the Catalan labour market. They found out that 37% of all job offers for highly qualified positions required the knowledge of foreign languages in the more advanced economic sectors: the automotive industry, electronics, and communications. In 1991, 928 large and medium-sized companies filled out a questionnaire about linguistic requirements for personnel selection, which stated that English and Catalan were required by these companies in around 50% of cases, while French was required in around 23% of cases. English skills were also a requirement for promotion in around 38% of cases. Furthermore, foreign companies in Barcelona reported that there was deficit in the knowledge of foreign languages, and that the situation was aggravated by the additional pressure caused by Catalan revitalisation policies, which the companies perceived as an obstacle and a loss of opportunities for such sectors as telecommunications and information technology (Solé and Alarcón, 2001: 53).

Catalonia is one of the regions in Spain that currently requires language skills the most. The following data (Figure 1.8) shows the percentage of the job posts that had a

requirement for English and other language skills in Catalonia (Adecco, 2016; 2018; 2019), which, in fact, has been decreasing rather than increasing. The year 2017 saw the biggest number of job posts with the language skills requirement. In Catalonia in the years 2018 and 2019, English has been the requirement in 64% to 87% of all the job announcements that had a language requirement, while French was required in 13% to 21%, and German in 9% to 13% of all job announcements.

**Figure 1.8**  
Job Postings With the Language Skills Requirement in Catalonia

2019	37,39%
2018	40,99%
2017	43,11%
2016	43,11%
2015	42,31%

Source: Adecco, (2016; 2018; 2019)

The Adecco reports from 2015 to 2019 also provide data on the requirement for language skills among the different professional categories on a national level. This table demonstrates that while fewer job posts for mid- and senior-level management, and entry-level employees required English skills, the opposite was true for technicians:

**Figure 1.9**  
Language Skills Requirement for Professional Categories

<b>Professional categories/ Year</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2015</b>
Directives	47.13%	52.05%	57.02%	54.38%	51.68%
Managers	37.77%	46.11%	39.12%	39.33%	38.87%
Technicians	40.70%	35.18%	34.02%	34.95%	34.87%
Employees	17.04%	16.49%	22.35%	23.32%	22.03%

Source: Adecco (2016; 2018; 2019)

Furthermore, the job offers with the greatest requirements for English skills in the years 2017-2019 were in marketing, business administration, sales, engineering, logistics, IT and customer service. The sectors that needed English skills the most were international organizations, travel agencies, research, international sales, engineering,



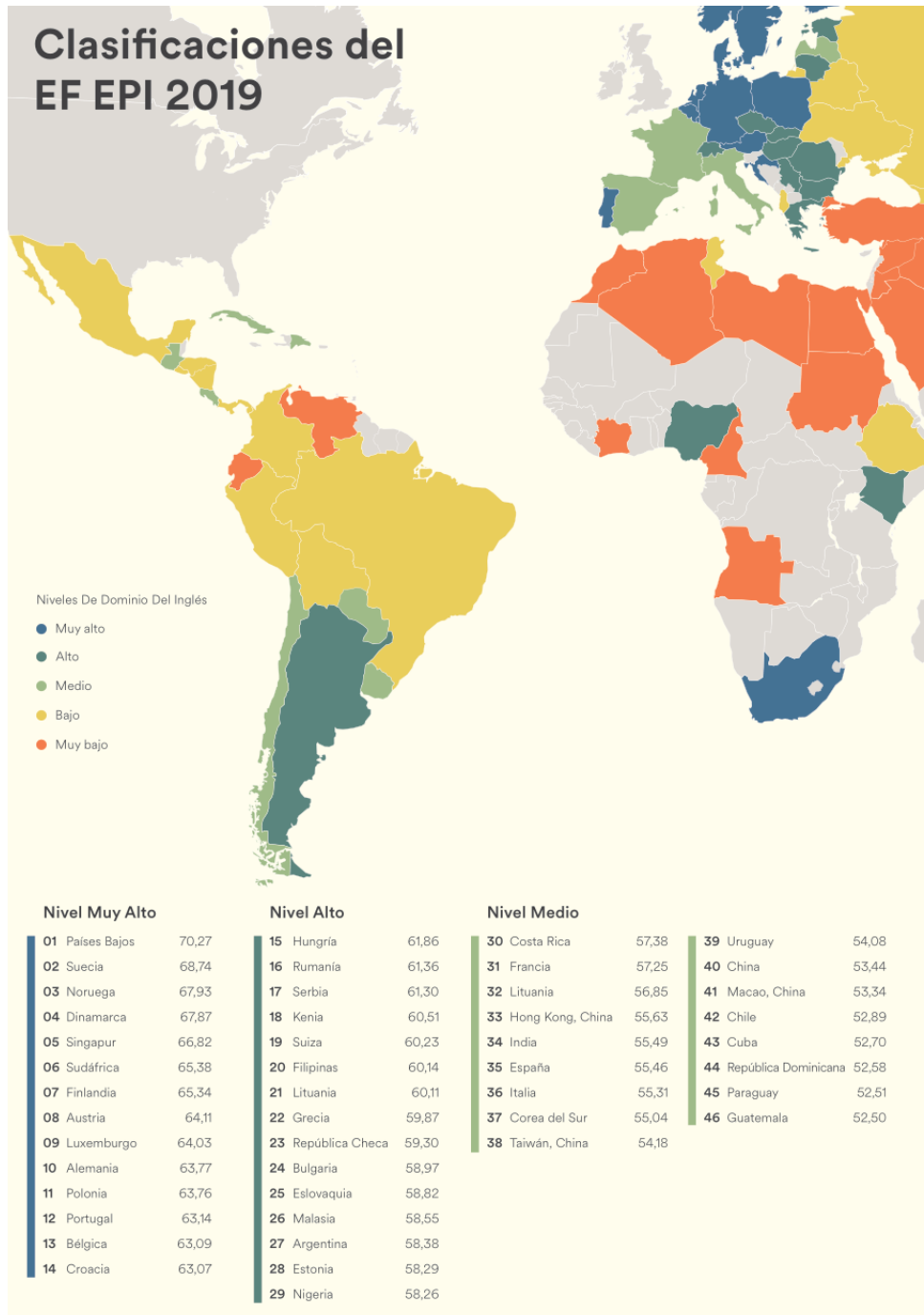
internet, the leather industry, information and assessment, aeronautics and general consulting.

#### **1.4 English skills in the media discourse**

The national media discourse in Spain has produced many articles with the titles that disparage the English skills of the Spanish population, for example “Spain’s level of English continues to be low while other countries improve” (Zafra, 2019), or “The level of English in Spain is not improving and Spain stalls in the global ranking” (Ecoaula.es, 2020). These articles compare Spanish citizens’ English skill levels with those of neighbouring countries based on the global English skills proficiency index (EPI), provided by Education First, a private organization that promotes English language learning around the world. According to this index, in 2019 Spain was ranked 35<sup>th</sup> among the 100 tested countries, which translates as having moderate level of English proficiency. This puts Spain behind most European countries, which have high proficiency.

According to the Education First statistics—which are based on English tests taken by approximately 2.3 million people in about one hundred countries between 2007 and 2016 respectively—46.6% and 45.8% of Spaniards did not know English, while the English skill level improved by 20% in Italy and by 10% in Greece over the same period of time (Zafra, 2019). Among the reasons for the lack of improvement, as argued by *El País* (Zafra, 2019) is the lack of financial well-being and the large size of Spain. When compared to smaller countries whose citizens are inevitably more open to job opportunities in foreign labour markets—and therefore more interested in learning English—Spain has a larger interior labour market, offering greater job opportunities for its citizens. Further reasons are that Spanish is a language with a large number of speakers; movies are always dubbed; and the Spanish educational system employs a language teaching methodology (Meneses, 2019) that does not place emphasis on communicative skills. Organizations such as the British Council, however, have stated that people who are studying English in private academies are mostly taking B2- and C1-level courses, which is evidence of an overall improvement of the English skills at a national level (Zafra, 2019). *El Economista* (Ecoaula.es, 2020) argues that in Spain and Italy people have low levels of English skills.

**Figure 1.10**  
**Ranking of Countries by English Skills Competency**



Source: Education First (2019)

These countries also face recurring unemployment problems. English skills, the article suggests, have a potential to help these companies improve their economy through carrying out faster and easier communication with the rest of Europe.

Moreover, big cities in Spain, such as Madrid, Barcelona, Bilbao and others, have better estimated English skill levels, as reported by the Education First ranking. The regional distribution of the skill levels is represented in the table below:

**Figure 1.11**  
Spain. Ranking of Regions by English Skills



Source: Ecoaula.es (2020)

The population over forty is also reported to have poorer English skills, which, as the publication *El Economista* (Ecoaula.es, 2020) argues, puts pressure on university and job training in helping the workers acquire the necessary skills. It is further reported that the OECD is also planning to launch the English skills country level rankings in 2025. English skills are becoming an important economic indicator.

Some media have argued that poor English skill acquisition in Spain is related to political inaction, that is, a lack of funding to improve English skills among population. From 2008 to 2010, there were a number of grants earmarked for English education initiatives, but since then, English has not been among the priorities of the central government (Meneses, 2019). In 2016, the Rajoy government passed a law mandating that by 2026 all university students would be required to attain a B2 in a foreign language, primarily English, before graduating (Hernández and Sanmartín, 2016). A similar measure had already been adopted in Catalonia in 2014 (Law 2/2014 states that students who started the university in the 2014-2015 academic year, would have to certify a B2 in a third language in order to graduate). However, the implementation of this law was postponed (Law 1/2018 postponed the obligation to certify the third language skill level for another four years, in order not to compromise obtainment of university degrees), once the analysis of the English skill level of the students who started their degrees in the 2014-2015 academic year revealed that their knowledge of a third language was yet insufficient and therefore, university degrees could not be contingent on students' English skills. The idea behind the obligatory B2-Level English requirement was to help university graduates be better incorporated in the labour market (Ibañez, 2017). However, the existence of the requirement at the university level has also unveiled the existing socio-economic inequalities among the student body, which affect access to resources necessary for the acquisition of English (Ibañez, 2017).

Furthermore, a B2 certification in a second language became the minimum requirement for Erasmus grants in 2014, reportedly as a measure—implemented by the central government—to cut down on state expenses associated with these programs. The requirement made it impossible for many students to qualify for the Erasmus grants, which in turn reduced the overall number of participants in the program (Sanmartín, 2014). This set a precedent for employing the language requirement as a barrier to accessing resources, such as mobility grants, in Spain.

Thus, Spain has become a country with poor English skill levels among the population in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis. Economic instability and unemployment problems caused by the structural labour market problems have negatively impacted the skills acquisition necessary for the emerging jobs. Corporations such as Education First and Cambridge, whose goal is to promote English learning worldwide, have been able to

identify the deficit in the English skills among the Spanish labour force (Figure 1.12) and the labour force worldwide (Figure 1.13).

**Figure 1.12**  
English Skills Gap

**How many employers have an English language skills gap?**

In every industry, there is a gap between the English language skills required and the skills that are actually available. Interestingly, there is little difference between large, medium-sized and small employers. Across all company sizes there is at least a 40% skills gap.

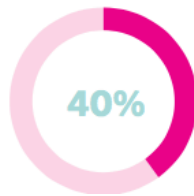
The biggest skills gaps are found in:

- **Internal-facing roles**, such as HR and Personnel, Accounting and Finance, Production and Logistics. External-facing roles, such as Marketing, Sales, and Customer Services, tend to have smaller skills gaps.

- **Non-native English-speaking countries**, where some of the highest skills gaps are in China, Japan, Russia and South Korea.

The lowest skills gaps are in middle and top management, where there is a 25% skills gap.

Countries that have historically traded with non-English-speaking countries often have the highest English skills gaps. The gap is smaller in countries where English is an official language (e.g. Singapore and India).



**Across all company sizes there is at least a 40% skills gap.**

Source: Cambridge English (2016)

**Figure 1.13**  
English at Work. The Most Important English Skills for Spain and Global



Source: Cambridge English (2021)

They have also generated discourses that frame the gap in employees' English skills as a problem that needs to be solved. These discourses further promote the idea that

companies should employ workers with English skills. By promoting such discourses, these companies also guarantee a business niche for language teaching organizations which can now provide English teaching programs not just for school and university education, but also for the workplace. This allows these companies to gain profits directly from businesses through on-the-job training, or from individuals who need English skills in order to get more job opportunities or gain access to work.

## Chapter 2 Research Questions

This thesis is concerned with the (re)production of inequality and the role that language skills in recruitment, namely English, play in it. Inequality manifests itself through the unequal, uneven distribution of material resources for the qualified labour force, such as work and access to it, leaving a particular group of people at a socio-economic advantage, while depriving the other group of the same resources.

Access to work and the quality of work in Spain are determined by the economic conditions that have warped the labour market. The number of people looking for jobs has outweighed the jobs available in the years since the 2008 crisis, and newly available jobs have required a distinct skill set from workers as the economy reorients itself towards internationalization (Ministerio de Trabajo y Economía Social, 2020). Thus, job-seekers belonging to the qualified labour force found themselves in economically different conditions – one sector of the working age population had stable permanent jobs, while a significant portion of people were hired on a temporary basis or became unemployed as a consequence of the 2008 crisis.

The current labour market in Spain, represented by private sector firms, requires English skills in order to enter the workforce. French and German are the other two foreign languages that feature in job offers. The knowledge of the two official languages in Catalonia, Catalan and Spanish, is implicit, Catalan being given the least attention by the private sector in line with the ideas that companies do not operate solely in a local Catalan context, but often in the national Spanish or the international context (Solé and Alarcón, 2001: 64). Contingency of jobs on the English skills requirement leads to conditions that resemble the “English Divide” (Terasawa, 2017), which refers to the existing split in the global labour market, where those who have been able to get the education and the English skills relevant for the knowledge-based economy have come to represent the globally mobile workforce employed at the multinational corporations that comprise the upper tier of the labour market (Ricento, 2015).

In Spain, the temporary work conditions have prevented the workforce from receiving formal training in the skills necessary to secure jobs in the future or improve their career. The reportedly poor English language education in schools and universities have made employability dependent on an individual’s socio-economic status, material

resources, and investment in language skills. The current English skill level of many Spanish job-seekers is preventing them from competing for the newly created jobs offered by large corporations in Barcelona. These jobs are instead occupied by the globally mobile workforce, which is recruited worldwide. Spain provides an economically attractive platform for large corporations to set up their subsidiaries, but the Spanish labour force is not able to qualify for these types of jobs due to the lack of English skills. In the post-2008 crisis, many unemployed Spaniards decided to move to other European countries in order to improve their English skills. Moyer (2018) provides an account of how the logic of learning English abroad for improving work-related opportunities at home further marginalized the bright, young, qualified Spaniards.

The focus of this thesis is the inequality that is the result of the English language criterion for recruitment. Park (2011) has studied how English skills testing in recruitment in South Korea was used in order to limit access to jobs to a more privileged group of society. The implemented testing system, once it was no longer able to secure a competitive edge for the more privileged group, was modified to include oral interview tests that were harder and still unattainable for South Koreans who had previously learnt to do well in the TOEIC tests in order to qualify for the jobs posted. This research demonstrates that parameters that guard class boundaries are fluid and they are shifted or “recalibrated”, once “the perceived value of such qualifications leads a wider selection of the population to pursue them” (Park, 2011: 452). This value readjustment to prioritize certain skills is part of the social inequality reproduction system (Bourdieu, 1984; Kraus, 1993; Park, 2011). Furthermore, Park (2016) notes that English skills were not necessarily useful for the actual jobs, but were rather a way to retain jobs for the upper classes. Similar conclusions were drawn in the study by Herat and McLoughlin (2010: 57), where English was introduced into job advertisements as a requirement and a way to select a particular kind of an employee irrespective of the job demands with regards to English.

While English may be a necessary skill for a greater number of jobs than in the past due to the globalization and internationalization in Spain, there is a need to unpack its role and determine whether and how participation in processes leading to access to work is the outcome of the complex labour market context and the interests of large corporations who might need this language resource to build their businesses globally.



Private recruitment agencies are central to the production of the systems of value or “symbolic boundaries” around skills that they use to define the worthiness of job candidates. This might shift the real social boundaries (Lamont and Molnár, 2002). Rivera (2016: 14) argues that recruitment practices, more particularly, the sorting and evaluation criteria, “shape individuals’ income trajectories and influence broader social inequalities” (Rivera, 2016: 14; Bills, 2003). The role of private recruitment agencies is to represent the interests of the firms (Gershon, 2017: 66), and thus—in signalling the labour market skills requirements—they may present themselves as merely the speakers for the ultimate employers. However, by defining the value of skills in the selection process, they themselves establish a value for skills that is responsible for exacerbating the socio-economic divide in the labour market by determining the parameters for an employable worker. In line with these ideas, the following research questions are addressed in this thesis:

- What are the complexities around the construction and operationalization of the English requirement in recruitment?
- What are the consequences of the recruitment practices that include English skills evaluation for job-seekers?

These questions address the perspectives of recruitment agencies and job-seekers who attempt to get a job in the current labour market. In order to account for all the complexities that the English requirement entails, we must first establish how recruiters create the requirement for English and upon which principles, and then examine how English skills are evaluated. Therefore, I suggest to operationalize these two questions through three additional questions that will guide the three analytical chapters.

The first question is: *What are the rationalities behind the English language criterion in selection? What value is assigned to English and other languages?*

Recruitment agencies create discourses about English skills being important for job-seekers’ employability. When the English skills requirement is set up, it is assigned a certain value which has to do with the clients’ requirement for this skill, the type of job and the type of company it is needed for. This research question aims to explore what companies in Barcelona have available positions, what is their need for English skills, and why. I also aim to understand the relationship between the English skills criterion,

the type of job, company and the job task it is needed for. The criterion for English skills is compared with that of other languages.

The second question is: *How is the English skills requirement built into recruitment practices and how are candidates differentiated on its basis?*

This research question focuses on English skills screening and evaluation practices. The neoliberal understanding of skills, employment of the skills paradigm in recruitment, goals with which such assessment is done, and the recruiters' agenda have an effect on how language skills are evaluated and eventually, on the role assigned to them in the recruitment process. English is formally taught as a foreign language with subsequent certification, which is not part of the screening or evaluation practices in recruitment agencies. The screening and evaluation of English skills is carried out in an informal communicative style, where the category of communicative skills and foreign language skills merge (Urciuoli, 2019; Flubacher, Duchêne, and Coray, 2018). The evaluation of candidates through their level of oral expression impacts their ability to demonstrate the desired proficiency, while the constraints of the interview format—in which candidates must show cues recognizable to the recruiter (Pájaro, 2018: 3)—puts additional pressure on them. Evaluations in which fluency is measured by recruiters' judgements (Kirilova, 2013) further problematize the ways in which English language is tested and evaluated.

The third question is: *What do individual candidates' work and recruitment experiences in relation to English skills tell us about the effect of English skills on access to work?*

The candidates' perspective is crucial for understanding how recruitment practices surrounding English skills evaluation, affect their lives, their prospects of finding jobs, and their ability to make different career moves, such as promotion. Their narratives on the recruitment experiences unpack their understanding of the English requirement and allow us to track how they respond to it. Some candidates are able to capitalize on their language skills, and they do get better employment offers, while others remain unemployed or have to change jobs because of the language requirement. Discourses about English skills and employability are an outcome of the neoliberal agenda to stimulate people into agreeing to readjust to the current reality in which jobs are not

guaranteed and the chances of individual economic success depend on skills accumulation. In Spain, the English skills discourse for success legitimizes the duality of the labour market and the lack of jobs. In that sense, job-seekers aspire to learn English in order to improve their socioeconomic status. They understand that private recruitment agencies play a crucial role in measuring employability to the English skill level of job applicants.

### **Chapter 3 Theoretical Framework: Language Skills, Access to Work and Recruitment**

This chapter provides the theoretical basis for the exploration of the links between language and economy, work and access to it, and the evaluation of language skills in the recruitment agencies according to their own business agenda. In an attempt to unpack why language is talked about in economic terms and how it is understood and used by organizations, I draw on several approaches that include language economics (Grin, 2003; Grin, Sfreddo, and Vaillancourt, 2010), political economy (Ricento, 2015), and language management (Piekkari et al., 2014), in addition to the main sociolinguistic approach. With the help of these approaches, I try to trace the processes that underpin the framing of language as a skill and show the interconnectedness of English, the neoliberal order, human capital, professional skills, and the value of English and other languages in the current economy (see section 3.1 *Language skills as an economic asset*).

Language skills are central to the production, communication, and acquisition of professional knowledge that comprise work processes. The English-as-a-lingua-franca and multilingualism approaches are used to create policies that frame the relationship between language and work (see section 3.2 *Language and business operations*). The way different languages operate in the workplace and how they are seen as a work instrument, reflects and forms a perspective that people with English and other language skills are ideal job candidates.

Language, namely English, becomes critical in access to work. Concepts such as employability, linguistic advantage/disadvantage, the English divide, language wall /language ceiling, and occupational gatekeeping, demonstrate how the centrality of language in access to jobs may contribute to the production and perpetuation of inequalities (see section 3.3 *Language skills in access to work*). Mediation of jobs through recruitment agencies obscures the relationship between language skills as a general requirement and the actual language demands on the job. Linguistic ability is seen as a matter of competence or incompetence in the selection processes rather than a criterion determined by the anticipated use a given language on the job (Roberts, 2021). Understanding how recruitment works and how new assessment strategies and paradigms emerge and influence which candidates are deemed valuable sheds light on

the ways in which recruiters may approach language as a skill (see section 3.4 *Recruitment agencies as labour market intermediaries*). In the last section of the chapter *Language skills evaluation* (see section 3.5), I present an overview of the way recruiters handle language assessment and evaluation. I also highlight the potential problems with the soft/hard skills testing in selection processes in relation to language skills.

### **3.1 Language skills as an economic asset**

The demand for language skills for employment purposes is an inevitable outcome of global economic processes, the current understanding of work, and work management in organizations. The types of jobs available and access to them are tied to the economic power of capital, mainly concentrated in multinational corporations and their decisions to invest in countries where they can make a profit (Ricento, 2015). Private corporations and businesses form alliances with powerful financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and governments that provide a legal framework for the production and distribution of resources (Ricento, 2015: 37; Harvey, 2005: 75). With their help, policies and discourses that regulate work management in organizations and access to jobs are created. Language, as Heller (2010: 102) argues, is used for the reproduction of the social order, as it becomes a requirement for jobs justified by the discourses about its usefulness for carrying out work in a tertiarized economy.

The labour relationships between workers and business organizations have undergone substantial change brought about by the expansion of a neoliberal free market that promotes the mobility of capital, people, and skills (Angouri, 2018: 41). These relationships now shape the labour market and structure how people compete for jobs. According to Gershon (2017), the key shift in the nature of work took place when corporations began to focus on their short-term stock value and act in the interest of their share-holders. By contrast, in the 1950s, a worker was considered the main business asset, and shareholder value was measured by the business contributions to stable communities and careers (Gershon, 2017: 212; Ho, 2017: 3). From the 1980s onward, companies started seeing workers as expendable. Workers could no longer hold stable, life-long jobs with career-development plans, as such plans were considered costly and, therefore, went against the business profit-making logic (Cappelli, 2009).

Flexibility is one of the characteristics of contemporary work. For businesses, flexibility means being able to hire and dismiss workers easily, while using their skills for profit gains. For the workers, it means that they accumulate skills and compete for jobs with no state-guaranteed employment and fewer social protections. Job insecurity is inherent to the current labour markets and is typified by fixed-term, temporary work contracts and a high risk of unemployment (Harvey, 2005).

The current framework of economic development that determines work conditions for individuals is based on the ideas that were formulated by a number of economists, such as Becker (1964) and Smith (1776), Mincer (1958), and Schultz (1963). Gary Becker, the pioneer of the modern human capital theory—developed in the 1950s at a time when technological progress was calling for skill-based qualified labour (Teixeira, 2014: 10-11; Tittenbrun, 2017)—established the link between economic advancement and investment in human capital (Becker, 1964). Skilled labour and higher education were both incorporated into the market logic, which is to say that investment in education and knowledge resulted both in economic growth and monetary returns for workers. For Becker (1964), human capital represented knowledge and skills. Similarly, Adam Smith (1776) argued that skills lead to greater efficiency and productivity of the workers (Tittenbrun, 2017: 10).

The contemporary neoliberal ideology promotes the concept of human capital, which determines the ways in which individuals should develop. By means of advancing their skills, they can then gain an advantage over others on the labour market (Holborow, 2015: 32, Piekkari, Welch, and Welch, 2014: 34). These ideas are reflected in the working definition of human capital provided by OECD:

Human capital can be broadly defined as the stock of knowledge, skills and other personal characteristics embodied in people that helps them to be productive. Pursuing formal education (early childhood, formal school system, adult training programmes) but also informal and on-the-job learning and work experience all represent investment in human capital. (OECD, 2019a)

For private firms, productivity and efficiency are the two cornerstones that translate into the competences and qualifications required of workers. Page (2010: 33) argues that the qualifications of employees are used to measure potential workers' productivity. In this regard, the value of language for work is in that it is considered, and

promoted as, a necessary skill and part of human capital, thus leading to both societal and personal economic prosperity:

Language skills are... a type of ability that contributes to economic prosperity, an asset that increases the competitiveness of European companies, and a form of human capital that can positively affect citizens' employability (Gazzola, 2016: 14).

The problem with the human capital theory—which is used for the moulding of most economic and language policies, including those in Europe (Holborow, 2018)—is that it does not account for the complexities of a job market formed under processes of globalization and the expansion of the neoliberal free market (Brown, Cheung, and Lauder, 2015: 210). That is, the existence of global competition for jobs and possibilities made possible by technology have rendered faulty the logic that more human capital and more skills can bring better individual gains and economic prosperity to nations, since companies can now find highly-skilled workers at a low cost beyond their national borders (Brown, Cheung, and Lauder, 2015: 216; Holborow, 2015). Human capital theory also serves to obscure the “shift of responsibility for employment outcomes from the social to the individual” (Holborow, 2018).

Neoliberal work conditions oblige workers to invest in and acquire language skills. Heller and McElhinny (2017: 232) point out that there has been a “scramble for access to linguistic resources in a world where it is not clear which skills will allow one to succeed”. Flubacher, Duchêne, and Coray (2018: 13) state that the logic of investment links acquiring additional language competences with job opportunities, presumably making candidates more employable. However, this investment does not work equally for everyone in the context of employment or recruitment. This idea opens a discussion about the *value* of language skills in the labour market and their role in access to work.

Sociolinguistic theory sees language as a form of capital. Bourdieu (1986, 1991) argues that there are different forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social. Linguistic capital, which is part of cultural capital, exists within a linguistic market where different language varieties acquire a certain value and create a social distinction. Cultural capital, in its turn, represents knowledge, skills, and qualifications that can be converted into economic capital and vice versa. Cultural capital may also bear a symbolic value, which means that individuals are recognised for the prestige of the capital they possess, which

is likewise convertible into economic capital. Thus, language skills, as a form of knowledge necessary for jobs or as symbolic added value, can gain an economic value or be exchanged for a higher salary. Similarly, Duchêne and Heller (2012b) argue that the neoliberal context treats language no longer as a source of pride, but as a source of profit. Language is commodified because it “becomes useful in order to both produce resources and enter the globalized market” (Duchêne and Heller, 2012b: 371). This means that besides having a use value, language also acquires an exchange value.

The concepts of use value and exchange value were introduced into economic theory by Smith (1776) and later, Marx. According to Smith (1776: 32), the word value has two meanings: it expresses the utility of an object or “the power of purchasing other goods which the possession of that object contains”. According to Marx (1859: 34), the use value is the service an object renders, while an exchange value means all the effort spent in the production of an object. David Block (2018) claims that language commodification cannot be explained merely by applying these concepts to language, as definitions provided by Marx are too narrow. However, he admits that these two concepts may be applicable to the notions of skills put forth by Urciuoli (2008), which are subsequently commodified. According to Urciuoli (2008: 221), the definition of commodity by Marx was developed outside of the neoliberal economic context in which we now live, and while he didn’t “fully develop a social theory of use-value, he did open the door for anthropological analysis of commodification”. Urciuoli (2008: 224) claims that skills have become commodities because they are part of productive labour with a market value: “skills discourses structure the conditions under which workers are recruited into the labour market and they structure the conditions under which new labour recruits imagine themselves as workers.” In addition, Urciuoli (2008: 221) states that use value and exchange value are “socially constituted”, and they depend on a person’s perspective, framed socially and historically.

This thesis shares the view on skills commodification by Urciuoli (2008), and it intends to analyse data relying on the idea that language skills represent an economic asset, since it is simultaneously used as resource in work processes and an asset with an exchange value that grants or denies access to work. According to Park and Wee (2012: 28), the belief that English grants economic success is an outcome of its perceived economic value. In the recruitment context, this means that besides the fact that English



can be a technical tool with an exchange value, it can also be a form of symbolic capital and serve as an index of desirable work identity or class that has the capacity to grant access to work.

This view is supported by the fact that English skills are only truly needed for a limited number of jobs, typically reserved for the highly-qualified workforce in the knowledge-based economy that contributes to the wealth of nation-states and their GDP (Ricento, 2015; Castells, 2006). The framing of language skills as an economic asset helps companies make a profit by using language as an instrument of work, as well as putting constraints on access to work in order to guard social boundaries. Existing selection criteria on the basis of language are bound to change further as more people learn English in order to gain a competitive advantage in the labour market (Ricento, 2015).

### **3.2 Language and business operations**

The previous section overviewed how the current economic order puts pressure on workers to acquire language skills as they are seen as a part of human capital with a use and an exchange value. This section further explores the economic dimension of language from the pragmatic perspective of its use for the production and work management processes, which is relevant for how language skills are taken up in recruitment processes. This is also done with an understanding that the framing of language skills as a work tool is non-neutral. It is a construct that justifies the exchange value of language skills for work, and it continues shaping the choices made by companies and people seeking work. The many ways in which English is linked to social and political processes can be called the “Entanglements of English” (Pennycook, 2021: 11).

International economic activity and business operations seem to drive the necessity to use language skills in work processes, conceptualizing them as a work tool. This process is true for English as well as other languages. Two paradigms, that of English as a lingua franca and that of multilingualism, are typically used by political and economic institutions to explain how languages can be useful for the workplace. The English-as-a-lingua-franca approach is critiqued and called “politically disengaged” (Pennycook, 2021: 11), because it does not account for the non-neutrality of the processes in which

English is submerged. The European approach to multilingualism promotes the idea that “language skills”, in a generic sense, are an important tool for communication and an economic asset. This masks the reality that *English* language skills are prioritized above all others and have been made vital for access to work (Studer, Kreiselmaier, and Flubacher, 2014). Additionally, more inequalities arise from an approach that frames multilingual language ability as an indispensable work tool due to unequal access to linguistic resources.

One cannot overlook the importance and the global role of the English language in many spheres of modern life, which extend to work domains such as science, technology, international organizations, business (Graddol, 1997), and the knowledge-based economy itself. English is the European and the global lingua franca that is used to bridge communication between speakers of different languages with an emphasis on information transfer (Jenkins et al., 2011; Park and Wee, 2012; Van Parijs, 2011). The utility of English as a skill lies in its capacity to be the seemingly neutral and purely communicative tool that advances understanding, cooperation, and work progress (Sanden and Kankaanranta, 2018). However, there is a general acknowledgement that as a work instrument, English only does not solve world’s communication problem or account for all the complexities that come with modern ways of doing work (Piekkari, et al., 2014; Angouri, 2018). Hence, other languages become imagined as work assets:

English has an undisputed economic usefulness in the European labour market, but it is not the only linguistic asset worth investing in; in some contexts, skills in other languages may be better rewarded than English (Gazzola, 2016: 7).

The European Union promotes multilingualism as an asset for businesses (Studer et al., 2014: 258) and a key competency for work (Martín Rojo, 2020: 165). In the Skills Agenda 2018 (Official Journal of the European Union, 2018/C 189/01), multilingual competence is described as “using different languages appropriately and effectively for communication”, and it consists of “the ability to understand spoken messages, to initiate, sustain and conclude conversations and to read, understand and draft texts, with different levels of proficiency in different languages...”. Although no mention of a particular language denotes a neutral stance towards the different national languages that are considered equally important in accordance with the language rights of EU

nation-states, the European agenda generally makes no reference to the “asymmetrical distribution of languages in business and institutional contexts” (Studer et al., 2014: 258), where English clearly predominates.

In line with the idea that language skills are an economic asset for companies, language economist Grin et al. (2010) argues that foreign language skills are central to production and they should be considered in relation to key economic variables, such as productivity, costs, and profits on which multilingual workers have positive effect. He sets forth a language-augmented theory of production, which accounts for better resource allocation and profit maximization. In this theory, the following points with regards to language skills are considered: the language used for internal or external communication, language in the supply chain, and the language of the target market, among others. For Grin et al. (2010), a foreign language is one that is different from the language predominant in a particular geographical area, for ex. English for a French speaker in France, or German in French-speaking Switzerland. Assessment of the language needs of a given company and their efficient integration into work processes by means of hiring workers with the required language skills lead to profits.

Further on, studies that look into how language is used in international business and trade have established that the distance between markets and economies (Beckerman, 1956) is measured through such parameters as culture, political system, economic function and language, among others (Schroedler, 2016: 21). Hence, the processes of internationalization depend on trade partners sharing a common language, a mother tongue, a target language, or a lingua franca, which is determined by proximity of the countries where a business operates. While English is believed to “reduce linguistic trade frictions” more than any other language (Melitz, 2016), it is not necessarily the first choice for small and medium exporting firms across Europe, as explained by Hagen et al. (2006) in a study that showed that German and French, not English, were chosen by two thousand such companies for language training.

Contemporary work is carried out within what is called the knowledge-based economy, where technical and scientific advancement generates new knowledge that is incorporated into the activities of companies in different sectors in order to gain a competitive advantage (Powell and Snellman, 2004). Hence the necessity for employees to have access to the knowledge that can upgrade the skills that they need to undertake

their jobs. According to Giddens (1991: 18), expert or technical knowledge shapes how people and organizations act and how the world changes accordingly. In addition, workplaces have become horizontal collaborative environments, where mostly project-based work is distributed among the team members with a minimal oversight (Angouri, 2018; Turco, 2016: 15). Consequently, language skills become central to work processes because of the need to receive and assimilate technical knowledge, but also to communicate and coordinate work with fellow workers who may not share the same physical space.

Large multinational companies offer work globally, and they have an ability to shape the labour markets and skills that become important for jobs. Thus, multinational corporations contribute to the division of the labour market into two tiers: (1) the upper tier that employs the mobile, English-speaking and university-educated global workforce and is linked to the knowledge economy and (2) the lower tier that makes use of the national and regional languages, although this is industry-dependent (Ricento, 2015: 111). However, Angouri (2018: 41) argues that in light of changes to the ways firms operate, we can no longer determine a firm's global reach based on size alone.

English is incorporated in language policies of multinational companies as a corporate language to standardize internal communications, that is, communication between staff units and subsidiaries, but also external language communication, that is, between clients and providers. Piekkari et al. (2014) argues that in reality, English is needed for survival in a corporation, although other languages may be useful too. The individual employees' need to self-skill in a corporate language is pushed lower and lower down the firm hierarchy, and some companies (Piekkari et al., 2014) want every employee to be fluent in English to avoid communication problems in meetings and to diminish the distance between subsidiaries of a larger enterprise.

Furthermore, English as a corporate language is an answer to rising linguistic diversity in the workplace or subjective diversity (Grin et. al, 2010) in Europe and other prosperous regions throughout the world, which is an outcome of immigration (Grin et al., 2010: 15; Piller, 2016: 23; Sanden and Kankaanranta 2018: 544). However, Angouri (2013) argues that regardless of the existence of a language policy, a multilingual workforce employs all resources available to them to reach mutual understanding. In practice, language policies can be formal or informal, since companies may start to

internationalise without regulating or assessing their language needs. Thus, language may end up “at the back of strategic planning” (Sanden and Kankaanranta, 2018: 558).

In line with the ideas outlined above, the understanding of English as a lingua franca has now evolved into “English as a multilingua franca” to be understood as an additional resource of multilingual users, “where English is always potentially in the mix, regardless of whether or not, and how much it is actually used” (Jenkins, 2015: 74). Coulmas (2005) admits that the EU commitment to multilingualism and its promotion as an asset (Duchêne and Heller, 2012b) is reduced by market pressure, thus, lending an instrumental function to English and a symbolic one to other languages:

Multilingualism is seen as a skill required by the linguistic market. A badge of Europeanness, it is claimed, is the ability to create functional and marketable “added value” for things like languages (Holborow, 2018: 522).

Consequently, the value of foreign languages other than English is in their symbolic or added value. In other words, they have an exchange value, but they are not necessarily useful for work processes, while English is considered instrumental to work (Coulmas, 2005; Holborow, 2018; Van Parijs, 2011: 183). According to Van Parijs (2011: 14), the reason English is so valued lies in its maximal-minimal competence: when confronted with a multilingual audience, the choice of language falls on the language understood by the maximum of people while minimizing laboriousness of communication. Consequently, the dominant (Grin, 2015: 131) and hegemonic position of English remains relatively unchallenged (Coulmas, 2005: 10).

### **3.3 Language skills in access to work**

Language is a site of struggle in contemporary economic and political contexts, a terrain (Duchêne and Heller 2012a: 14) upon which inequalities are being enacted, “a site for production of social differences” (Duchêne, 2020: 93), since it becomes a critical element in access to jobs. This section explores the conditions in which language skills become embedded in processes associated with unequal distribution of work opportunities, as well as the mechanisms that legitimize the treatment of language as key for candidate selection. Unpacking these mechanisms challenges the idea that language skills are part of recruitment simply because they present an economic asset for organisations.

The labour market is a space where people made up of the skills they possess (Urciuoli, 2008), compete for desired jobs, which are not available for everyone. When language is a resource that is added to this mix, the opportunities to get a job are diminished for people who do not possess the given language or the type of proficiency in question, which qualified professionals in Spain currently do not. To understand how and why the requirement for language skills is created, what is the relationship between the language skills as a work tool and as a job requirement, and how the language requirement shapes the selection process, we need to unfold the underlying processes that turn competition for jobs into a competition where the job candidates' language skills are assessed in order to determine who is worthier of a job. Opportunities are always somewhat unequal; however, language skills might make them even more unequal when they are key for access to work.

English language skills are considered critical in access to the quality jobs that are considered in this project. According to a number of studies in the field of economics of language, language and political economy, and sociolinguistics, there are more job opportunities for candidates with several foreign language skills, and there is also a language premium on the foreign language competence in most non-English speaking countries in Europe like Austria, Italy, France, Germany, Switzerland, and Spain (Grin, 2001; Ginsburgh and Prieto-Rodriguez, 2011; Lang and Siniver, 2009; Stöhr, 2015). Similarly, a person with a sufficient proficiency in English and tertiary education degree has an advantage in competing for jobs in the knowledge-based economy— the higher the level of that person's English, the more opportunities emerge (Ricento, 2015: 38). The idea that English—or any other language that is important in a given nation-state— grants more job-related opportunities is described by Flubacher, Duchêne, and Coray (2018) through the notion *employability*, which denotes one's probability of finding a job:

The current public discourse on language competences as pivotal for professional success results in an association of language competences as a central aspect of employability. The interplay between investment and employability thus becomes highlighted in the context of unemployment (Flubacher, Duchêne, and Coray, 2018: 25).

In a similar vein, Shorten (2017) considers the concepts of *linguistic advantage* and *disadvantage* in order to illuminate processes through which individuals are denied capabilities (in other words what they can achieve) or resources, such as access to employment due to their lack of language skills or inadequate linguistic repertoire. Linguistic advantage or disadvantage may serve as a basis for exclusion from access to material resources or work, although Piller (2016: 5) admits that there is a need to further identify and recognize disadvantage on the basis of language, which can be overlooked due to a larger societal focus on discrimination related to other factors such as gender, age and ethnicity. Besides, inequalities may also be produced at the intersection (Crenshaw, 1989) of language and these factors. Findings presented by Flubacher et al. (2018) specify that in the context of employment, language can indeed be a benefit unless other factors, such social class, nationality, and so on, come into play. In addition, these authors determine that language skills may also be presented as an advantage or a disadvantage, in order to “rationalize failure” or legitimize other institutional practices.

The requirement for language skills is critical for access to jobs through a recruitment process, and it is for that reason that it should be problematized from the perspective of its practical need or use on the job. According to Roberts (2021: 211), the linguistic demands of jobs are not clear-cut or well-defined by the national legal frameworks, and there is little or a lack of transparency between the language criteria and the actual workplace demands. Moreover, companies hire people on the basis of a skill that is not immediately required to carry out the job, and they then justify the presence of the language requirement as “ensuring the flexibility in the labour market” (Roberts, 2021: 212). Because of this framing, the inequality created by the requirement may be seen more as a language incompetence issue rather than language discrimination (Roberts, 2021). According to Roberts (2013), requiring a language for a given job should not be considered appropriate unless that language is necessary for the satisfactory performance of the job. The lack of information about the correspondence of the language criteria for hiring and language use at a workplace (Grin et al., 2010) and lack of legal state control (Roberts, 2021: 211) over this issue, leaves a margin for companies to require language skills for a larger number of jobs and for recruitment agencies to use these skills as a deciding factor in the job distribution.

Park (2016: 458) points out that in Korea corporations were pushing for their workers to have English skills despite the evidence from research that they did not need English for their jobs. Possessing these skills allowed job-seekers to compete for better jobs and better schools. In a study by Herat and McLoughlin (2010: 56-57), English was used to select and screen employees rather than as a way of fulfilling a particular need for language to carry out a particular job. Such findings are an outcome of recruitment practices that do not correspond with the actual utility of language skills at work. Such practices may be conditioned by standardized language policies of large multinationals, which require a minimum level of English language skills for all their workers. These policies are the outcome of economic and ideological discourses that have turned language skills into an economic asset.

Park and Wee (2012: 4) claim that English plays a part in the reproduction of class divisions due to the unequal access to English with a consequence in the job market. Those with access to a better-quality language education most likely come from privileged backgrounds. Therefore, the candidates who do not possess these competences, are excluded from access to social and economic wealth (Park and Wee, 2012: 10). These processes become possible due to the hegemonic role of English, which is only supported by the neoliberal frameworks of skills and job access through intermediary recruitment institutions, where the perceived value of English may reserve a better job position for a particular profile of worker. Furthermore, Terasawa (2017) argues that the “English divide” accounts for the difference in the English language skills among people, and it is related to social and economic disparities. Similarly, in Kubota’s view (2012) that there is a “disparity in aspiration and proficiency” among people from different socioeconomic backgrounds, a higher proficiency being a feature of elites.

This thesis does not focus on class reproduction directly, although it does acknowledge that gaining a good proficiency level in English or any other foreign language comes at an immense investment of resources and time which is limited to the people who can afford both. Therefore, the English divide is creating different socio-economic conditions and has potential to aggravate the already existing inequalities in the Spanish labour market. It is important to point out that universities throughout Spain (Hernández and Sanmartín, 2016), including Catalonia have adopted the policy of issuing degrees to students in all disciplines with an obligatory minimum of a certified B2 in



English (Diari Oficial de Generalitat de Catalunya, 2018), in order to provide the future workers with the necessary English knowledge and improve their chances of finding employment. However, this policy has not been enforced due to the lack of institutional resources necessary to provide the adequate English education, which continues to be the prerogative of private teaching institutions. Besides, the promised English certification level may be insufficient for people to get jobs, because it does not correspond to how the language criterion is applied in job recruitment practices, and it certainly does not account for the professionals who have graduated earlier with no certified minimum of B2 English skills.

The lack of language skills limits access to jobs as well as other possibilities for career development (Piekkari et al., 2014; Peltokorpi and Vaara, 2012; Neeley, 2013). These processes are referred to by Piekkari et al. (2014: 72-80) as the *language wall* and *language ceiling*. “Language ceiling” denotes the impossibility of vertical career opportunities such as a promotion, while “language wall” refers to the inability to “engage in horizontal career moves, such as moving to a different functional area, taking an international engagement, or not being hired due to a lack of language skills” (Piekkari et al., 2014: 80). In these cases, a job candidate’s career depends on recruiters, hiring managers, and human resources officers who may have different guidelines and understandings of the language requirement. However, a candidate’s career also depends on his or her agency (Ahearn, 2001). When confronted with a language requirement in a job description, one may simply refrain from applying for a job because of a perceived lack of the language competence. Investment in the language skills does not directly lead to career advancement because of the high language criteria.

The notion of *gatekeeping* is often used to highlight the production of inequalities in access to jobs (Roberts, 2021). The initial definition of institutional gatekeeping provided by Erikson and Shultz (1982), stressed the asymmetrical power relation between the interviewer and the interviewee in a gatekeeping encounter, where the interviewer has the power to grant or deny access to employment. Typically, studies on gatekeeping (Gumperz, 1982; Roberts and Campbell, 2006) focused on the interactional analysis of the interplay between linguistic/cultural behaviour, membership categorization and the interview outcomes, which revealed discriminatory practices towards migrant job candidates (Tranekjær, 2015). Migrant candidates were often

constructed by interviewers as lacking the cultural/linguistic knowledge—due to a lack of access to the necessary resources—in order to be able to showcase interview-appropriate behaviour, and for that, they suffered a “linguistic penalty”, as portrayed in the study by Roberts and Campbell (2006). Hence, gatekeeping resulted in denying job access to a certain group of candidates based on a specific categorisation of those as “illegitimate” speakers of the language in question.

Tranekjær (2015: 83) takes the notion of gatekeeping a step further by arguing that the very process of categorization is the cornerstone of a gatekeeping process as opposed to gatekeeping as a result of the immediate candidate’s performance at the interview: “gatekeeping processes consist of subtle hierarchizations of categories, behaviours and individuals within a given cultural context of established meanings and ideologies”. In order to show what constituted a legitimate language competence by candidates of migrant background who were interviewed for medical internships, Pájaro (2018) made use of the term *passing*, introduced by Goffman (1963). Gatekeeping of Norwegian non-nationals to enter the medical field in Norway was the result of how interview processes were organized, what candidates knew and how they understood the evaluative agenda. As well, how language competence was conceived as a category and how it was evaluated by the interviewers (Pájaro, 2018: 307).

The present thesis approaches gatekeeping as both the institutional or bureaucratic frame (Kirilova, 2013: 27; Maryns and Slembrouck, 2021) and the individual recruitment decisions that are instilled with the power to shape recruitment process and outcomes. The point taken up about gatekeeping consists in identifying the processes associated with the construction and implementation of the language skills requirement through recruitment practices. This will help me explore and problematise how the requirement for English skills is understood by recruiters, how it is constructed in relation to its relevance on the job, and how it is evaluated. I will also be able to explore how candidates who lack proficiency may be kept from accessing work in Barcelona and how those with a good knowledge of English are selected as valued candidates. Following Flubacher et al. (2018: 24), gatekeeping stems from the complexity of selection processes that guard access to jobs. Additionally, new forms of gatekeeping may emerge from irregularities in the labour market, such as excess supply or demand of workers (Granovetter, 1995: 26), financial crisis, unemployment, or economic restructuring.

### **3.4 Recruitment agencies as labour market intermediaries**

Recruitment agencies have become key players in international labour markets as they mediate the processes of work distribution and access to jobs for both companies and people seeking work. Recruitment agencies are embedded in national economies with differing political and economic systems, different labour market conditions, and global and national discourses that shape recruitment practices (Sharone, 2013). These practices in turn define the patterns by which people get selected for jobs (Bonet, Cappelli, and Hamori, 2013). The recruitment context is complex, since, according to Gershon (2017: 185), different stakeholders in job candidate selection—recruiters, hiring managers, human resources employees—view the process through different lenses, such as that of the speed and legality of hiring, a candidate’s fit, and the profitability of the client firm. Recruiters have to reconcile these different perspectives in order for their agency to make a profit by presenting candidates who get hired. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the mechanisms of work of recruitment agencies and recruiters in order to understand their rationale in relation to the construction and assessment of the English skills requirement.

The way people find work has changed over the last few decades, as has the average time one spends at a single job. In the past, the main difficulty associated with getting a job consisted in learning about an open position. Social capital or personal networks, also called informal hiring, played a major role in finding and securing a job (Granovetter, 1973; 1995). Now, candidates mainly find jobs online through various job portals and professional networking sites, or by applying directly to companies. According to Gershon (2017: 105), more than two-thirds of jobs are currently found online and through private recruitment agencies that use the online resources to post job announcements. The main difficulty in getting a job today consists in making one’s résumé stand out among the multitude of almost identical résumés that flood recruitment offices (Gershon, 2017; Cappelli, 2012); in overcoming the automated résumé screening barriers set up by recruiters; and in matching the complex hiring criteria throughout the lengthy selection recruitment processes.

Hiring, as a market “transaction between an employer and a candidate” (Bill, Di Stasio, and Gërkhani, 2017: 293), is external to companies (Cappelli and Keller 2014: 307). This means that job vacancies are no longer filled by internal promotions, which

used to be the case more than three decades ago. As a consequence, employers have to rely on the evaluation of candidates' skills by recruiters rather than their actual work performance (Bill, Di Stasio, and Gërkhani, 2017: 293; Cappelli and Keller, 2014: 312-13; Williamson, 1981). This pivotal change has "fostered an industry of search consultants and other businesses that act as brokers to match candidates to jobs" (Bonet, et al., 2013: 343). It has also generated a framework for skills evaluation, which has become an integral part of recruitment practices and has gained further relevance as jobs have become increasingly short-term.

Recruitment is defined as all organizational activities designed to generate a qualified pool of applicants (Viswesvaran and Ones, 2010: 178; Barber, 1998). Recruitment agencies are mediating bodies, or matchmakers (Finlay and Coverdill, 2002), between national and multinational firms and job applicants seeking employment. Their main business consists in finding job-seekers through the accumulation of candidate profile information in their databases, as well as finding companies who would want to hire the agencies' candidates through daily cold calling and routine visits to firms. These two lines of work are equally important, although it is the client companies that recruitment agencies profit from.

Before the 1970s, recruitment agencies charged candidates for finding them jobs (Finlay and Coverdill, 2002). Since then, private recruitment agencies have reoriented towards taking fees from companies for finding candidates to fill vacant positions. This means that a recruitment agency's success relies on convincing companies to hire candidates. It also establishes different forms of cooperation between the recruitment agencies and the client companies, which shape how recruiters carry out recruitment practices.

The two distinct forms of work that recruitment agencies engage in are called *contingency* and *retainer* (Finlay and Coverdill, 2002: 4). Recruitment agencies are divided into departments that manage temporary and permanent junior or senior, and elite jobs separately. The departments that manage temporary and permanent senior or junior jobs typically work on contingency basis. That is, they only receive a fee once one of their candidates is hired (Finlay and Coverdill, 1999). Since there is no upfront payment made, client companies hire several recruitment agencies to look for the same position. This puts pressure on recruiters and creates fierce competition among the

agencies, success often being contingent upon their speed and ability to find the candidate with the best technical and personal qualities. Alternatively, recruitment agencies sometimes work on an exclusive basis, or retainer, which means that they are the only agency that the company has hired. This is the case for recruiters who have managed to establish good relationships with their clients and for elite executive jobs where several separate fees are paid by the client for an activity called headhunting. Fees are paid for several activities carried out by a headhunter that include completing the list of potential candidates and interviewing them. The final fee is received if the candidate is hired.

The companies' need for new employees grows as new companies set up new businesses in different locations around the world. Recruiters may be hired by organisations that require candidates for hundreds of new job positions. Special outsourcing departments are created for this purpose, from which client firms borrow recruiters and keep them in-house while the hiring project lasts. The different modes of work with client companies define how candidates are searched for and the skill sets that are evaluated. While a single job posting requires finding a candidate with a particular skill set fast, elite jobs require a more detailed examination of all the candidate skills and personal characteristics. Companies that hire recruiters for larger projects typically have specific job requirements for the whole body of future workers, which often include language skills and other characteristics that are defined by the culture and origin of the firm.

The main value of recruitment agencies lies in their ability to position themselves as a central segment in the recruitment chain. By proving their indispensability to the other actors in the labour market, they become a powerful player that sells or distributes two valuable resources: human capital and jobs. In order to achieve this, recruitment agencies promulgate several ideas among firms: (1) the idea that attracting talent is essential to firms as there is a direct link between profitability and human capital; (2) that because talent is scarce, due to job mobility, firms need to manage potential risks with regards to finding employees (Beck, 1992; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Brown et al., 2010; Faulconbridge et al., 2009: 804). For recruitment agencies, the risks associated with companies' finding the right employees are viewed as "market opportunities" (Beck, 1992: 46). As a consequence, recruitment agencies occupy a dominant role in

regulating access to work. Recruitment agencies operate within the *war for talent* paradigm (Michaels et. al., 2001), where employability skills need to be developed by employees in order to get better job opportunities. This theory is deconstructed and challenged by Brown and Hesketh with an emphasis on the role of recruitment agencies in the process of shaping these discourses (2004).

Bonet, Cappelli, and Hamori (2013: 342) argue that recruitment agencies transform the employer-employee connection into a triangular relationship. In the context of this relationship, the boundaries of companies become more permeable (Bonet et al., 2013: 342). As a consequence, recruitment agencies are able to shape companies' business strategies, such as outsourcing employees. The recruitment agencies also shape the hiring outcomes as they fulfil three functions. First, they provide information for employers and employees about each other; second, they mediate selection; and third, they maintain the network of relationships with people for whom they have found candidates or jobs. Falconbridge et al. (2009) argues that recruitment agencies have the power to shape and determine what constitutes an "employable candidate" as they find new methods of testing and assessment that promise to deliver even better results. According to Jackson, (2007: 379), labour market inequalities "are the macrolevel result of a whole range of microlevel decisions by employers and prospective employers".

Recruitment agencies are considered efficient at finding good job candidates; they have the infrastructure, the pools of candidates, and they work within tight time constraints. Efficiency often serves as a justification for contracting an external recruitment agency. However, it is the social aspect of recruitment that adds value to their work. Recruitment agencies are used by hiring managers to strengthen their positions within organizations and diminish that of the human resources departments (Finlay and Coverdill, 2002: 186). Recruitment agencies also act as a buffer to protect companies in case they hire staff from competitor companies and help to conceal the company's business strategies or vulnerabilities (Gershon, 2017: 75). Moreover, the candidates who already have jobs are more valuable to recruiters, in line with the idea that more successful workers are typically content with their jobs (Finlay and Coverdill, 2002: 186). The main recruiter's goal is then to convince job-seekers to accept the job on offer. In doing so, they contribute to increasing the employee turnover (Bonet et al., 2013: 358).

Modern recruitment is conditioned by several processes such as technological development, globalization, internationalization of businesses, labour market fluctuations, and the changing modes of work, which all affect the methods used in recruitment and the desired set of skills and other characteristics to be assessed. Researchers who look into recruitment agree that there is a need for better understanding of wider economic processes, such as unemployment and greater competition that affect employee selection (Viswesvaran and Ones, 2010: 177). Also, there is a need to understand the hiring criteria used in recruitment and the logic behind them (Bill, Di Stasio, and Gërkhani, 2017: 304).

Bill et al. (2017: 294) and Grin et al. (2010: 76-77) point out that several theories about candidate's knowledge and skills, and how they transform into future job performance, inform recruitment assessment practices. In this sense, recruitment is carried out with the purpose of predicting workers' job performance and matching a candidate to a job. These theories are that of human capital (Becker, 1964), screening (Arrow, 1973; Berg et al., 1970), and signalling (Spence, 1974). According to the ideas of the human capital theory, knowledge obtained from education is converted into workers' skills, thus increasing worker's productivity. The screening theory (Arrow, 1973: 194), however, suggests that knowledge obtained in education and training only orders students according to those of their educational abilities that are not convertible into productivity, which is more relevant for the job. However, the information about one's training and skills may provide the employer with an idea about a candidate's other abilities (motivation, ability to learn) that are relevant for job performance. The signalling theory states that skills assessed in recruitment may indicate other workers' abilities that employers find valuable for jobs. In line with these ideas, job requirements may include skills and profile features that do not necessarily correspond to the use of the same on the job, as they are considered proxies for other candidates' abilities.

Recruitment agencies tend to rely on requirement criteria that differ across countries; however, most of them include an evaluation of educational and skills credentials, work experience, and personal characteristics called soft skills (Urcioli, 2008). Sharone (2013: 11) argues that recruitment practices draw on discourses available in national and global contexts and that the weight given to each of the profile features of a given candidate is made into a recruitment pattern that becomes

characteristic and defines what it takes to get a job in a given context. Thus, in Israel *specs*, or a combination of credentials, skills, and work experience, are salient in a selection processes, while in the United States one's personality or fit with the company matters more.

*Predictors*, the indicators that predict job performance and help recruiters in decision-making, are used in recruitment practices. Recruiters typically look for skill sets associated with globalization and internationalization. However, they may be country- or context-specific. Among the modern predictors are an increased cultural intelligence and a global mindset (Viswesvaran and Ones, 2010: 177). A global mindset is defined as "cross-cultural skills: competence in effectively interacting with managers from different cultures, *foreign language skills*". Hence, language skills in recruitment may perform the role of a job performance predictor rather than a requirement that corresponds to the actual need for a given skill on the job. Predictors may be specific to a given context, and they may also be related to other processes, namely screening.

In line with the trends outlined above, technology has an impact on how the initial screening of candidates is conducted, including key searches of résumés, computer-based scoring of application blanks (Viswesvaran and Ones, 2010: 180). Rivera (2020: 2027) argues that hiring algorithms that identify key words in résumés, and screen out candidates on that basis, shift the recruitment paradigm from human decision-making to mere data-processing by machines. Automated screening is an outcome of the overwhelmed state of the institutions that mediate access to work (Cappelli, 2012). Additional requirements are introduced via the automated screening systems in order to cope with the multitude of résumés received, which is the consequence of sizeable unemployment. Cappelli (2012) argues that critical questions need to be asked about the actual role of certain requirements in selection. Employers, who often have difficulties finding adequate job candidates, tend to place the blame on skills gaps among the potential labour force, in spite of the fact that these gaps are formed by unrealistic expectations of employers and the number of requirements they put on a job posting (Handel, 2003).

Bryson, James, and Keep, (2012: 131) argue that labour markets may influence the way recruitment is carried out. During recessions, when there is an over-supply of skills on the local and global labour markets, new criteria for employment might emerge.



Additionally, the less regulated the labour markets are, the more freedom there is to choose key skills employers would like to see in their candidates. Research on recruitment points out that recruitment practices may contribute to overskilling and overqualification of workers in relation to the jobs they occupy. In other words, workers have more skills, education, and experience than they need to occupy a particular job as a consequence of the job access criteria.

A selection process typically starts with a job order from a client firm, which is subsequently made into a job description that is posted on a given agency's webpage. Recruiters sort out the incoming applications and begin phone-screening candidates. The number of people they call depends on the nature of the job and the candidates who applied for a job or who are already in the recruitment database. Further on, the candidates whose characteristics match the job requirements are invited for an interview (Bryson et al., 2012: 126). Interviews are considered to be the key events for checking and gathering additional information "for the purpose of making selection and job choice decisions" (Stevens, 2009: 41). As an evaluation or assessment strategy, interviews are typically intentionally informal. As pointed out by Lockyer and Scholarios (2007), carrying out the informal recruitment assessment of skills via questions about candidates' past experiences is cheaper and quicker. These methods of evaluation respond better to the time constraints, and sometimes they are even more reliable. Brown and Hesketh (2004) argue that both formalized (tests or sets of formal selection criteria) and non-formalized (questions about candidate's profile) recruitment practices— may result in inequalities, as they are carried out by recruiters, who are not objective parties to the processes at hand.

The role of individual recruiters within a recruitment agency deserves special attention. They are in charge of selection processes, but their role is that of an intermediary, which means that they are not part of a hiring organization. Instead, they relay the information they obtained about a candidate during the selection process to the hiring managers of the client firm. This position potentially adds complexity to the hiring process (Gershon, 2018: 66), since subjectivities underlying the structure or process of selection may shape the outcomes. For instance, the interpretation of a job description or prioritization of certain skills over others affects the course of the recruitment process and ultimately defines which candidates will apply and eventually

be hired. Similarly, Rivera (2016: 14) argues that the decision as to who to present as a job candidate—along with everything that comes before—is subject to their judgement and their ideas about merit:

Taking a closer look at the realities of résumé review exposes that what counts as a skill, ability, and human capital—and perceptions of who has more or less of it—resides in the eye of the beholder (Rivera, 2016: 105).

The selection and screening logic in a given recruitment agency, as well as a role of an individual recruiter in a job interview, should not be overlooked. The institutional agenda of a recruitment business and recruiter's subjectivities often shape selection process in ways that narrow down opportunities of qualified professionals who are looking for job opportunities.

The language skills dimension in a selection process should be examined taking into account how a recruitment agency is embedded in a wider national and global context, its intermediary role, profit-making agenda, and the individual recruiter who has the power to make judgments about candidates' skills. English skills may be used as a screening and evaluation requirement linked to the logic of recruitment operations, thus shaping an employable candidate. The research on recruitment institutions in relation to how they change their recruitment practices over time as political and economic conditions undergo change as well, is still scarce (Bill et al., 2017). More research is still needed regarding foreign language skills as a requirement in relation to the whole selection process and what the implications of such assessment practices are. The recruitment process and recruitment agencies have a transformative power to shape the labour market and determine who gets access to jobs.

### **3.5 Language skills evaluation**

This section looks into how language skill evaluation is conceptualized in recruitment with reference to the competence-based interview evaluation framework and the framework of skills. While interviews are key events where language is assessed as a competence, it is framed and approached by recruiters as a skill during the entire selection process. The way English skills are judged at various stages of selection may also shift their conceptual understanding in relation to the hard/soft skills paradigm.

Competence-based interviews (Roberts, 2021) have been used in recruitment practices since the 1990s, and they are considered ethical, rational, legitimate processes (Weber and Parsons, 1947) that evaluate candidates' competencies, that is skills, knowledge, and professional behaviour in a seemingly neutral and efficient way. The competence-based approach is typically considered holistic, which means that it focuses on finding out about candidate's ability to apply one's skills, knowledge, and ways of behaving in a potential job through questions about past work experiences.

At the core of the job interview lies the construction of a self-narrative by candidates, which is then assessed by a recruiter through detailed questioning. Roberts (2021) argues that this process is enacted through mechanisms of Foucauldian key technologies: examination and confession (Foucault, 1977; Fairclough 1992). A candidate's narrative about his/her work experience, education, skills, and personality presents a valued "identity display" (Silverstein, 2003) or a display of competence (Bauman, 1975). Therefore, an interview should not be understood as a direct examination and assessment of competences, but rather as a representation of these competences through a narrated self by a candidate, and an evaluation by a recruiter that is carried out through perception of candidate's abilities.

Skills comprise learned abilities and behaviours that can be productive for organizations (Urciuoli, 2008, 2019). Skills are divided into hard skills, which are forms of knowledge that are teachable and trainable—also described as technical requirements for the job—and soft skills, which are aspects of personality, communication and ways of social participation (Urciuoli, 2008, 2019). These skill sets have a variable value that gets assigned by the recruiter in the selection process. However, the general value of each skill and the requirement to test them is also defined within the larger economic, political, societal and institutional context (Roberts and Campbell, 2006). According to Roberts (2021: 79) and Urciuoli (2019), in English-speaking countries, there has been a shift towards prioritization of previous work experience and soft skills, rather than technical or hard skills. Communication skills, defined as soft skills, are given the utmost importance as they are emblematic of alignment with the current neoliberal beliefs and practices, and ways of being and speaking (Urciuoli, 2008, 2019). They are the "technologies of self" (Foucault, 1988) that

indicate the kind of profile that is valued by the current organizational system. This ideal profile is also called a workplace fit (Allan, 2016).

In Spain, English skills improve one's employability, and there is evidence that these skills are given substantial weight in a selection process. English skills are teachable and trainable, and since they are often a job requirement, they can also be considered hard skills. However, it is not clear whether English skills are a technical requirement in the selection process, that is whether they are a requirement because of their use value or their exchange value. It is equally unclear whether they are assessed and presented to client firms as a hard skill, a form of knowledge and expertise, or as a competence that indicates neoliberal subjectivity. Understanding what English skills represent within the paradigm of skills in the selection process can yield answers as to what role they are given in recruitment in Spain, although the paradigm of hard and soft skills itself is seen as problematic (Angouri, 2018). That same paradigm, however, is inherent to selection processes and the assessment of competences that are carried out at recruitment agencies.

A number of authors (Flubacher et al., 2018; Allan, 2016; Urciuoli, 2015, 2019) agree that language occupies a unique position within the soft/hard skills paradigm. According to Urciuoli (2015), language as a hard skill refers to the linguistic knowledge that has utility or provides a worker with capacity to cope with the job tasks. Language as a soft skill presents language as an instrument of communication or social participation (Urciuoli, 2019). Flubacher et al. (2018) states that language is a hard skill "when a certain level of language competence is required for a position". It is also a soft skill, "when communicative competences are at stake, and it is therefore labeled as communicative skills". Urciuoli (2019) argues that there is a conflation of communication skills and language skills and that talk is the common denominator for both. Also, language as a form of knowledge and as a form of social practice can be equally valued within the neoliberal framework.

If English and knowledge of other languages are assessed at interviews, there is a need to unpack what is being measured and by whom. In other words: What is considered the level or indicator of skill that would have a positive impact on job access? Why? And how this is articulated? Important is the point that the conversation in English is led by a recruiter. Because of the recruiter's role as official interlocutor, the

candidate's ability to demonstrate this competence depends not only on his or her own knowledge of English, but on the recruiter's as well. In other words, the English language competence is produced jointly by the recruiter and the candidate (Roberts, 2021, Roberts and Campbell, 2006).

In line with the competence-based framework used in recruitment (Roberts, 2021: 73), English skills are evaluated as a competence, through an oral conversation with an inquiry into candidates' past experiences associated with their language ability. This interactive approach seeks to demonstrate that a candidate can effectively communicate while also showcasing the candidate's previous experience using English in a similar work context. This type of an assessment serves to define who has a higher level of English knowledge (a hard skill) in order to perform the job functions. Also, it can help to identify "a desirable profile that fits the flexible labour regime" (Allan, 2016: 618), which is also valuable for the neoliberal communication skills (a soft skill). Candidates may then be declared a mismatch with the desired profile, based on either of these parameters. In Allan's view (2013), the conflation of language skills with communicative skills may lead to interview practices where an inability to communicate appropriately is, sometimes erroneously, understood as inability to perform professional tasks in the language in question. The type of test given lends a profit of distinction (Bourdieu, 1991), where an individual who possesses the right communicative ability in English is recognized as a valid candidate. Questions about how the candidate used English in previously held positions create a reproductive mechanism whereby those who have used English at work in the past will be automatically considered to have the right language skills.

In an oral assessment, English skills can be considered from the perspectives of fluency and meaning-making, which also puts emphasis on the communicative aspect of the language skill. Fluency is commonly understood as the ability to produce speech easily and accurately. Kirilova (2013: 77) describes fluency in a foreign language as the "production of smooth speeches without pauses, disruptions, hesitations, seeking for words, or self-repetitions". Fluency also includes appropriate vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Roberts (2016) argues that in interviews, fluency may not necessarily be judged by the number of errors or speech inconsistencies, but rather by the ability to produce valid meanings. Codó (2021: 236) problematizes fluency and native-like English

as the articulation of a valued competence from the perspective of comparability of the fluency of different speakers.

In Pájaro's (2018: 194) view, the evaluation of language skills competence in job interviews is highly problematic. The language competence is assessed in terms of his or her interview performance, whether the candidate has the necessary knowledge to carry out job tasks, in terms of communication, produced together by the recruiter and the candidate, and in terms of fluency. Besides, the level of language ability prescribed by the job interview assessment may be distinct from that required by the actual job functions and the context in which the language has been learnt (Pájaro, 2018; Shohamy, 2007).

A given candidate's language skills have the potential to positively influence both the recruiter's and the client's decision-making processes when those language skills are considered from the perspective of both hard and soft skills. One negative aspect, however, is that this type of a language evaluation gives the recruiter the power to decide on the "appropriateness" of a given candidate's competence.

At the interview, the recruiter is faced with a responsibility to make judgements on the oral language skills ability. Candidates' success depends on how well they are able to perform the desired language competence such that they are seen not just as having the necessary knowledge or expertise, but also as fitting the profile of a hireable worker. Assessing English skills as a competence privileges communicative skills (Shohamy, 2007: 120) while also legitimizing this form of testing, and it imposes the specific language knowledge on job-seekers (Shohamy, 2007: 118). In carrying out English assessment practices, recruitment agencies legitimize themselves as institutions that have the right to verify these skills. This may have further consequences for language policies, which often draw on *de facto* practices (Shohamy, 2007: 119). The language skills of candidates acquired through education and the certifications they obtain are devalued in the recruitment institutions, which impose their own methods of language skills validation.

## Chapter 4 Methods

This thesis is an ethnographic study which delves into the situated recruitment practices with the goal of understanding why the English requirement is ubiquitous in selection processes in Spain and how it is conceived and evaluated by recruiters. The choice of an ethnographic approach is conditioned by the imperative to understand how recruitment works as a social process embedded in our understanding of access to work, and to gain first-hand knowledge (Mason, 2002) about the private recruitment practices that are otherwise unknown and are impossible to gain insight and to tap into. The critical sociolinguistic approach is adopted as a lens through which the centrality of language skills in access to work is explored and as a way to unpack how recruitment agencies—which distribute an important and scarce resource, work—have come to construct and reinforce inequalities on the basis of language (Heller, Pietikäinen, and Pujolar, 2018). The same approach is used to determine what consequences the recruiting practices analysed have for job-seekers.

This chapter is divided into six sections. The first section *Research design* describes the steps undertaken in order to carry out this ethnographic study. Section Two, *Access: a winding road to recruitment*, provides insights into how access to the two private sites where fieldwork was carried out, was achieved and negotiated. The section *Data* overviews the time frame of this project and the types of data that were collected. The section *Recruitment sites: Spencer and IT Power* contains information on the two main sites where fieldwork was carried out. The section *Ethics protocol* outlines the formal ethical procedures that were followed in order to carry out the present research. The section *Researcher's reflexivity: (Not) A fly on the wall* provides the critical thinking on the decisions, thinking, and actions that have shaped this research.

### 4.1 Research design

In the design of this dissertation, the theory, the data generation and the data analysis were approached in a dialectical, recursive way. The decision-making was seen as an ongoing process, with strategic decisions—such as the choice of sites and selection processes, the methods of data collection and coding, and the choice of theoretical concepts to analyse the data—taken as the research and fieldwork developed (Heller, Pietikäinen, and Pujolar, 2018; Mason, 2002).

The choice of sites and ethnographic methods was conditioned by the research interests, preliminary fieldwork and preliminary research, but also by the possibility of access to the sites, and different spaces and informants within those sites. Recruitment sites were chosen as a nexus where distribution of jobs takes place and is negotiated (Heller, Pietikäinen, and Pujolar, 2018: 49), and where the approach to language skills in a selection process brings out the issues of unequal access to jobs for the Spanish labour force. The initial idea was to choose two or three sites where recruitment processes with the requirement for English, described in the media, could be observed. Public and private recruitment and headhunting agencies were considered as potential sites, as well as human resources departments of larger firms.

The selection process, which includes several stages such as the screening of job applications and curriculum vitae, as well as subsequent phone and in-person interviews of the recruiters with job candidates or clients, was identified as central for tracing how English skills requirement is implemented at various recruitment stages. Private recruitment agencies were selected as suitable sites to explore the role that English skills play in access to jobs in Spain because they are the spaces where the making of the job posting, the screening and selection of job candidates were taking place. Observation of these processes could provide insight into what kinds of job-seekers would be selected as candidates for the jobs offered by businesses and corporations through labour market intermediaries. Private recruitment agencies are seen as a key player in the Spanish labour market that mediates access to the pools of valuable jobs and candidates, and that produces discourses about English skills and employability.

Besides private recruitment agencies, human resources departments of larger firms were also considered in order to provide a perspective of the kinds of data they could yield, as compared to recruitment agencies. Human resources departments could shed light on the side of the recruitment process that did not take place on premises of the recruitment agency, that is, they could provide a perspective on the manner in which companies undertake recruitment. Also, the companies' premises are spaces where the more advanced stages of interviewing and candidate selection not managed by recruitment agencies, such as the selection of the final candidate, take place. However, choosing a human resources department as a main fieldwork site would not yield this type of data, since typically the interviewing for job positions is carried out by the



companies' managers who then only have to seek the approval from the human resources department of a given company. I opted out of pursuing access into human resources departments of larger companies after many unsuccessful attempts. However, through semi-structured interviews with the recruiters of some of the most important multinational firms in Barcelona, it was possible to learn how they applied the English requirement.

Another concern was to identify observations of which types and levels of jobs were going to provide insight into how English skills were relevant for recruitment. Private recruitment is typically split into departments that handle temporary low-skilled jobs, qualified junior and senior jobs that need a higher education, and elite or high-management jobs. The decision-making with respect to these options was based on the preliminary data collection I carried out as a participant in a larger project on recruitment and on an initial exploration and testing of all of these options. My options became more limited as I navigated through the pragmatics of gaining access and got a sense of which level of recruitment presented a better perspective on the role of English skills in the candidate selection process.

In the end, I decided to look into the jobs for highly qualified professionals. My probe into the different recruitment departments revealed that English skills seemed to be more relevant for the junior and senior candidates with higher education, as they were more scrutinized by the recruiters. Additionally, the labour market data on the category of workers with higher education was checked to see whether unemployment among the qualified labour force was indicative of how difficult it was for them to find and get a job. This could provide an estimation on the number of people who could be looking for jobs among this group. In their turn, headhunters downplayed the English skills requirement when the actual interviews took place. At that professional level, once the candidates were pre-screened, English skills were taken for granted.

Further methodological considerations refer to the sorts of processes that would be accessible for observation at recruitment agencies, and to what kinds of ethnographic data I would be able to obtain with the aim of answering the research questions posed (Mason, 2002: 54). Preliminary data collection revealed how recruitment offices were organized, both spatially and operationally. Interviews with candidates are the key events that usually take place in small interview rooms at recruitment agencies, while

the rest of the recruitment process is carried out in a shared office space where all recruiters sit in front of their computers with their headsets on. Fieldwork had to take into consideration this separation of the office space and the constraints imposed on access to these two spaces, as well as the recruiters' work routine.

Observations of recruitment interviews with candidates were going to shed light on the ways English and other foreign language skills were assessed, but this slice of the recruitment process would only provide a fixed moment of a given applicant's situation within the wider selection process. Similar to the way Rivera (2016) approached the design of the interview data gathering, I intended to obtain a deeper understanding of what I saw at the job interviews. That meant that I would need to talk to recruiters before and after the interviews to contextualize each interview event. These short pre- and post-interview conversations were also going to help me gather additional information, such as candidates' curriculum vitae and the specific job descriptions or job postings. Also, recruiters could describe the selection processes and the logic of their decision-making.

Besides the job interviews, the data that I aimed to gather consisted of observations of other stages of the selection process, including curriculum vitae and phone screening and the daily recruitments routines and practices, such as the creation of postings and looking for potential job candidates online. Observation of all of these stages was not feasible at the beginning of my fieldwork due access constraints, but negotiation and renegotiation with the recruiters finally opened up the possibility of obtaining these kinds of data. Additionally, semi-structured interviews with recruiters and candidates, as well as other people involved in recruitment—such as the manager of an online job platform, the director of a headhunting company, the sales people from IT Power who went out to companies in order to secure new job projects for the recruiters—were chosen as a method to explore the perspectives of those stakeholders on the language skills criteria for access to jobs and how it was weighed against the other skills in the recruitment process. In the case of the candidates, these interviews allowed me to tap into their recruitment experiences and explore how English skills criteria affected the lives of the people seeking jobs through recruitment agencies. Thus, the study has considered how the importance of English skills for applicant selection was experienced from the perspectives of both the candidates and the recruiters, which was then

reflected in the design of the questions and the analytical chapters. The findings with regard to the two sites have yielded similar results. Spontaneous conversations and semi-structured interviews with candidates helped to gain insights into the outcomes of the selection processes (Mason, 2002: 66) that were not available in or through the recruitment agencies. Over the course of two years, I carried out fieldwork in two private recruitment agencies. More than ten other recruitment agencies, headhunting offices and human resources departments were contacted in an attempt gain access, which enabled me to gain a better insight into the recruitment scene in Barcelona.

#### **4.2 Access: A winding road to recruitment**

Pájaro (2018) noted that gaining access to institutions where recruitment is carried out is complex because of the sensitive context, where personal information about the candidates and the client companies is exposed, and due to the high stakes for the main stakeholders, the recruitment agency, the job-seekers, and the businesses. Also, private recruitment agencies function in highly competitive, time-sensitive and very unpredictable conditions. These aspects inherent to recruitment made access one of the biggest constraints for this ethnographic study. A lack of a personal connection that could facilitate access to a recruitment site, and the fact that I was an outsider to recruitment also meant that I had to build my way in from scratch, which took time.

In the spring of 2017, I started actively contacting recruitment agencies and multinational companies by email. Going to agencies' offices in person was not an option since recruitment companies only open their doors on an invitation basis. They are usually located in larger buildings with guarded access open to those with a special entry card or an appointment. Emails were written to the directors and managers of several recruitment agencies. In those letters (always written from an institutional email account), I introduced myself as a researcher, explained what my research consisted in, and asked for their collaboration. The project information was always provided in the letters. The companies contacted this way rejected collaboration due to tight employee schedule or big load of work. I continued contacting recruitment agencies, but this time I asked to speak to recruiters through the reception call numbers. On the phone with recruiters, I stated that I was a researcher on a project and provided information about it. I was explicit about the project and its goals, but I asked for an interview with a

recruiter as a first research step. In this way, I carried out the first round of interviews with the recruiters at three major multinational agencies and a headhunting firm. The bottom-up approach where I first contacted recruiters who then informed their superiors about my study seemed to work better.

Simultaneously, in the spring of 2017 I was preparing to leave my part-time teaching job at a language academy and start my full-time grant contract with the university. At the time I was teaching a group of adults at the language academy and I mentioned my research to them. Some adult students, as it turned out, had recruitment experiences – they had recently changed jobs or they had been involved in a job search. From the beginning, my research design included interviewing a minimum of ten job candidates. Several of my students were happy to participate. This resulted in audio-recorded interviews, three of which turned out to be key for this project. The information I learnt from those participants helped me to determine which recruitment agencies to contact. The recruitment agencies that came up in the conversations with my participants were quite well known and well established in Barcelona, and they were a more or less typical choice for a person looking for a job. I understand this step as rhizomatic, where “research processes are networked practices in which each decision is conditioned by the previous ones and impacts on the future ones” (Heller, Pietikäinen, and Pujolar, 2018: 15).

#### **4.2.1 Access to Spencer**

Prioritizing the recruitment agencies that came up in the interviews with the informants led me to browse through their webpages. Difficulties with gaining access were also making me explore other ways of getting in touch with the research sites. Spencer, my first research site, had a fly-in chat window on the webpage at the time. Without having my hopes up, I typed the information about me and my research into the chat. I like to think that it was partly because of how I contacted the agency that this project was made possible.

The chat operator gave me an email address for the marketing department at Spencer. I wrote an email to the marketing department, and shortly after, I was contacted by email by a recruiter named Paula from Spencer Junior. We agreed on an interview, which took place a few days later. It was held at Spencer and it lasted almost

two hours. At the end of the interview I explained my research in general terms and requested to observe some interviews with candidates. Paula turned out to be my way into Spencer but not without a few bumps along the way.

After the initial interview with Paula at Spencer, I had to call her several times and send various emails to ask when I could come in and undertake research, which we had agreed upon at the first interview. It was not until the end of October of that same year that I was able to observe my first job interview. Recruiters that I called generally stated that they were busy and this was the reason to put me off. After the first interview observation, Paula presented me to two of her colleagues, Melanie and Maribel, who promised to help me with more observations. However, after four interview observations at Spencer Junior, Paula found another job and left the company. She put me in touch with the division manager Valentina, who, after a negotiation, gave me the legal permission to observe 15 more interviews by mid-December 2017. Also, an intern was assigned to manage the communications with me and coordinate the interview observations with recruiters.

Alfredo, the intern at Spencer Junior, contacted me after the Christmas vacation in January 2018. In February, I was finally invited to come to the office to observe an interview but it got cancelled, so instead I was given the opportunity to observe phone screenings. Alfredo and the other recruiters were very friendly towards me; however, I was only admitted to the Spencer office to listen in on phone screenings and attend interviews. I would usually come in and sit at reception while waiting for the interviews to begin without the possibility of being in the large office room where all the recruiters had their desks. Sometimes, I felt it was awkward when the candidates whose interviews I was there to observe encountered me in the interview room after we had shared the same reception area. At some point, I was relocated to the interview rooms where I could wait for the candidates to arrive. In June 2018, when my allotment of observations was nearly met, I was attending interviews with Valentina, the division manager. It came as a surprise to hear her ask “What do you want?” with the connotation that she could be of further help in response to my saying “Well, this is nearly over”. I asked her for a contact from another department at Spencer that was managing senior profiles and jobs for permanent positions. She gave me the contact, and we said goodbye.

Around the same time, I also found out that Alfredo, the intern who was in charge of communication with me, had become employed at the recruitment and consultancy firm, IT Power, just as Paula had been earlier on. I decided to interview him in his new position as I was still trying to access a second site. We had got to know each other well over the course of six months, and I knew he would not mind. Thus, I interviewed Alfredo in September 2018. In September, when the recruiters were back from vacation, I contacted the person that Valentina had put me in touch with at Spencer Senior. This person had gone on maternity leave, however, so she kindly gave me the email of her replacement, Marc.

Marc welcomed me to the office on the next floor. I did not have a chance to debrief him on my research and who I was, as he interrupted me and explained all of it to me instead. He had been talking to Valentina so he was well-versed in the parameters of my research project. Marc gave me the interview schedule for a week. We agreed on 15-20 interview observations. I also could come and sit in the office in-between the interviews, and I was also allowed to audio-record them (I could only write notes of the interviews at Spencer Junior). During the month of October 2018, when I was at Spencer Senior, I sat at an empty desk in the recruiters' office and I observed some of their work. I also got to know the people sharing the desk with me (the desks in both Spencer and IT Power are long and fit several people), as well as those sitting right in front. I had conversations with them over the course of my stay in the office. I could now enter the building and go directly to the elevator and then into the office just like a standard employee. This second round of fieldwork was shorter but more productive because I could observe the office routine and because I was allowed to audio-record the interviews. Recruiters were generally friendly.

#### **4.2.2 Access to IT Power**

I had interviewed Alfredo, who was now employed at another recruitment agency called IT Power, over the summer. As my fieldwork at Spencer was coming to an end, I asked him if it would be all right to come in and do observations, similar to those he had managed at Spencer. Alfredo kept his promise and very shortly I had a first meeting with Edgar, the manager of the recruitment unit, and then another meeting with the whole team where I explained my research and what kinds of data I was intending to collect.

Similar to how things worked at Spencer, I inquired if I could come in on certain dates, and whether recruiters could inform me of their scheduled interviews. However, everyone was much more casual and laid-back at this firm, and they said that I was welcome to come by anytime, and that I could talk to recruiters directly and agree on interview observations. Having Alfredo as a contact and the fact that Edgar, the manager, had himself done ethnographic observations for his Master's project—meaning he understood my work—helped me to gain the kind of access where I could observe more of the recruiters' routines and practices beyond the interview observations.

I spent three and a half months at IT Power between March and June 2018, coming in several times a week. During that time, Alfredo was helping me with my research but in the role of a recruiter (unlike at Spencer, where he had been responsible for overseeing my observations). I also established good relationships with several other recruiters who did not mind showing me their candidate database. They allowed me to watch them screen curriculum vitae on their computers and do phone-screenings. I could see what information they typed into their computers on candidates. Some recruiters shared their job processes and hardships associated with candidate searches for certain positions, others explained the steps they took in the process of reworking a job order into a job description they posted online and how the information they highlighted in the job description would affect who applied and who would eventually be selected for a job. I was a witness to recruiters' work conversations, and I shared lunch with them many times, whether in the office or a nearby restaurant where the team would go together. I got to know quite a few employees further up the hierarchy, including the Team Manger, the Recruitment Manager and Director, as well as the company CEO, with whom I once shared the elevator. I spent hours being involved in these activities, and when I was waiting on interview observations and there was nothing going on, I could observe how recruiters worked or what they said on the phone or to each other.

### **4.3 Data: Inside a recruitment site**

The data that were collected over the period of two years, are grouped by type and research site in the table below. The table with more details on the data collected can also be found in *Appendix C*.

The fieldwork was carried out between April 18, 2017, when I began interviewing informants, actively contacting recruitment agencies and interviewing recruiters (with the first interview taking place in May 2017) and June 11, 2019, which is the date of my last fieldwork observations at IT Power. During these two years, there were periods of time when I was not present at either of the sites due to the constraints explained in the section *Access: A winding road to recruitment*. In that time, I interviewed the informants, called other companies or agencies, and interviewed their staff. That is, I was involved in activities that would lead to gaining more knowledge about recruitment and to establishing a larger network of recruitment contacts. That work was important because it provided an overview of the active recruitment agencies and companies in Barcelona, and their hiring practices. It also opened up a possibility to meet more informants and to compare what was observable at my sites with the information I gathered at other similar sites. My fieldwork activities are presented as a timeline of events in *Appendix C*, since I view it as a continuum of events and activities I undertook in order to collect the data relevant for this project, which were not limited to the two research sites.

The activities that were carried out outside of my main sites are presented in Table 4.3. Among them was my attempt to get an internship in one of the headhunting agencies, with the goal of being able to carry out fieldwork. This activity provided me with the experience of a being a candidate myself. I also went to the public unemployment office in Barcelona to investigate how it worked and how it could be useful for my study. Furthermore, I managed to get a pass to attend a business fair held in Barcelona (through a personal connection). I checked booths of the companies and recruitment agencies represented there. I had conversations with people from one of the most popular job-search websites, as well as with some recruiters from a multinational company I later visited to conduct an interview. I collected booklets provided in those booths that were relevant to my research. This activity provided me with the knowledge about which companies participate in the fair, what their goals are



and whether and how human resources and recruitment agencies participate in this type of events. I also attended a few presentations within the scope of that event.

The main types of data generated (Mason, 2002: 52) in this project were observations of recruitment processes, the real interviews held at the two research sites, and the semi-structured interviews that I conducted with my participants, both recruiters and job-seekers/job candidates. People within recruitment sites were my data sources because they possessed the knowledge and experience that were relevant for my research (Mason, 2002: 51). By means of semi-structured interviews I found out (1) what impact English skills had on candidates' job access or promotion, (2) what firms had specific language policies that shaped selection processes with regard to language skills, (3) what candidates were selected and how they were selected, and (4) why English was or was not subsequently used on the job. Another technique, pre- and post-interview observation chats with recruiters, helped me to gather the documents relevant for the observations (curriculum vitae, job descriptions, job announcements). In that regard, interviews and chats with informants were the way of tracing what lay beyond the observations I could carry out, especially when I had access constraints.

These data were collected and stored safely in a digital format, on the cloud and hard drives, or as hard copies. The digital data is organized by research site, type, date, and recruiters. All the fieldwork is recorded in the fieldwork diary with entries made chronologically. The fieldnotes include information on the recruitment practices I observed, the people I met, my conversations with them, the descriptions of the sites, as well as my reflections, questions and ideas. The transcriptions of the audio-recorded materials were added to the fieldnotes; therefore, each entry represents all the data available for a particular event, which had an impact on the analytical logic.

For analysis purposes, the data were transcribed and coded by themes and by cases (holistically). In the data set, perspectives of the candidates and the recruiters were also clearly defined. The themes and cases were compared across the two sites, the types of jobs (by sector and title), the recruiters and their practices, and the candidates. The analysis followed the logic of the mismatch in the language requirement, the recruitment practices emerging from it and the consequences for candidates who were also observing this mismatch.

**Table 4.1**  
Spencer Data

<b>Data Type</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Recordings</b>
<b><i>Interview Observations</i></b>	32 interview observations:  19 interview observations at Spencer Junior (4 of them were audio-recorded and 15 non-audio-recorded)  13 interview observations at Spencer Senior (12 audio-recorded interviews and 1 non-audio-recorded interview)	Non-audio-recorded  + 8, 3 hours
<b><i>Pre- and post-observational chats with recruiters</i></b>	Short audio and non-audio-recorded conversations with recruiters from Spencer Junior and Senior	Non-audio-recorded + 3,07 hours
<b><i>Semi-structured interviews with recruiters</i></b>	4 semi-structured interviews with recruiters from Spencer Junior and Spencer Elite	3,8h
<b><i>Phone screenings and general observations</i></b>	3 recruitment processes	Non-audio-recorded
<b><i>Meetings and phone conversations with recruiters</i></b>	3: informal meeting with recruiter Paula; a 15-minute phone conversation with Valentina, head of Spencer Junior; official meeting with Marc, manager at Spencer Senior	Non-audio-recorded
<b><i>Semi-structured interviews with candidates met at Spencer</i></b>	3	1,7h
<b><i>Fieldnotes</i></b>	182 pages	
<b><i>Documents</i></b>	Candidate CVs  Job descriptions/job announcements  Documents provided by a recruiter Paula  Written account of the overviewed elite job test  Personality test	
<b><i>Pool of job offers hand-picked from the Spencer webpage</i></b>	155	

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**Additional data**

Email correspondence, photos

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**Table 4.2**  
IT Power Data

<b>Data Type</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Recordings</b>
<b><i>Interview Observations</i></b>	19 interview observations	14h
<b><i>Pre- and post-observational chats with recruiters</i></b>	Yes	Yes
<b><i>Semi-structured interviews with recruiters</i></b>	4 semi-structured interviews with recruiters	2,5h
<b><i>Phone screenings and general observations</i></b>	2 recruitment processes	
<b><i>Meetings and audio-recorded conversations with recruiters</i></b>	2 formal meetings: 1 with the head of recruitment Edgar 1 meeting with the whole recruitment department Several informal meetings over lunch	
<b><i>Conversations with recruiters</i></b>	6 audio-recorded conversations with recruiters	1h
<b><i>Fieldnotes</i></b>	127 pages of fieldnotes	
<b><i>Documents</i></b>	Candidate CVs, job descriptions, job orders, 1 personality test, booklets, photos	

**Table 4.3**  
Additional Data

Data Type	Description	Recordings
<i>Semi-structured interviews with recruiters</i>	5 + 1 telephone interview with recruiter from HR of a company	3,6h
<i>Semi-structured interviews with job applicants</i>	14	6h
<i>Visits</i>	Visit to a public employment office Visit to an elite headhunter Visits to the premises of other recruitment agencies	

#### 4.4 Recruitment sites: Spencer and IT

**Spencer** is a reputable multinational recruitment company with headquarters in Europe that was founded in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The company is present in over 30 countries across the globe, mainly in Europe, the Americas, and Asia. It employs several thousand workers. This business specializes solely in recruitment and positions itself as a recruitment firm that typically works on a contingency basis. This means that the fees for recruitment services are paid by firms once they have hired the person selected by Spencer. Up until the actual job offer to the selected candidate, Spencer competes with other recruitment agencies to seek candidates with the most suitable profiles. Hence, the time-sensitive nature of their work and the goal of choosing the most attractive profiles. The company's business strategy is to establish collaborations with client firms in order to sell their services, and also to extend their unique client database which they draw the candidates from. The database can be updated by recruiters who do specialized searches using other available internet platforms or simply by candidates themselves who upload their CVs onto the Spencer webpage when they are in search of work. Spencer collaborates both with private- and public-sector firms, private sector firms prevailing.

The Spencer brand and business model is promoted through an ideological mission by means of profile matching, which is essentially placing itself in between people and companies. They contribute to business success and profit maximization, which

eventually leads to positive impact on the economy and, as they claim, on individual career development. Spencer argues that the current labour market conditions are characterized by constantly changing job markets, fixed-term work projects, workforce mobility, and digitalization. The recruitment agency can be useful to businesses because it has access to pools of flexible workers with the right skills.

Spencer and other recruitment firms control knowledge production that aids their business, by carrying out and publishing their own research on labour market trends and by gathering and analysing data they draw from their own work or other sources. They claim to be in a constant state of innovation and to be in the process of patenting their own candidate selection methodologies. They are also on the lookout for opportunities to capitalize on. Technology is used by them to gather data they need to work and make profits, and then to produce knowledge that favours them. The labour market reports done by recruitment agencies outline the future of work, the importance of human capital, and the scarcity of talent. In other words, they cultivate insecurity while reinforcing their usefulness and indispensability. All the knowledge they produce through various modern media such as industry magazines, blogs, and podcasts, are shaping how the world sees work and workers.

The Barcelona office is located in a beautiful neighbourhood. It occupies several floors in a shared building and employs around 50 recruiters. Spencer is split into several branches that specialize in different types of jobs defined by rank and contract type: lower-level/entry-level jobs, or junior positions with temporary or permanent contracts; mid-level jobs that are characterized by high qualifications and permanent contracts; and elite jobs (this division does headhunting). I call these different departments Spencer Junior, Spencer Senior and Spencer Elite respectively. Spencer Junior has about 12 recruiters, Spencer Senior employs 40 people, and Spencer Elite has three headhunters. Spencer Senior accounts for 65% of the company's profits.

Additionally, Spencer has a division specializing in IT and HR outsourcing. Three recruiters from the latter division work as in-house recruiters for one of Spencer's client firms, a Shared Service Centre that provides services for all of Europe. That means these recruiters only hire employees for a single firm, and they do not spend a lot of time on the premises of Spencer. They typically stay at the client firm and only come to Spencer to check in. Three recruiters carry out the entire recruitment process in English, which

requires English proficiency from both the recruiters and the candidates. The job profiles that Spencer works with are divided into different sectors: Finance and Banking, Customer and Office Support, Digital, IT and Engineering, Logistics, Marketing, Law, Sciences, Retail etc.

Spencer's clients are all types of companies, including small ones that do not know how to hire specific profiles, as well as big or medium multinational firms that seek external help with their recruitment processes. Typically, recruiters say that they partner up with or help HR departments of their client firms. However, the main contacts that guide them through a company's recruitment needs are managers and directors, who know what kinds of profiles they are looking for. Recruiters each have their own specializations. Paula specializes in Engineering and Logistics, and at the time of the interview, she was managing 15 recruitment processes. She was interviewing up to 20 people a day either on the phone or in person, subject to work load and variation. For each process, a Spencer Junior recruiter needs to send a shortlist of three to five final candidates. The job offers are published across all available job portals like *Infojobs*, *Infoempleo*, *Indeed*, *Infofeina* and their own database. The unique database owned by Spencer is integrated with LinkedIn (Spencer has a special agreement). This allows recruiters to see the real-time employment status and the place of work of all the candidates from their database that are registered and updated on *LinkedIn*. The real-time information is relevant for recruiters because it saves them time and makes the information that they would otherwise have to find on their own easily accessible. Therefore, they can speed up their processes and present the candidates faster. The Spencer database allows recruiters to have a selection of job candidates with the job title in question and have access to their updated curriculum vitae. Time is also of the essence, because if Spencer is not quick enough to find and present candidates, other recruitment agencies will. In the next step, recruiters check if the curriculum vitae of candidates at their disposal are a match for their job position. Then they call the candidates by phone to specifically check their educational background, career experience and language skills. Knowing about candidates' language abilities also saves recruiters time (according to Paula). If the Spencer database does not yield results, recruiters have to search for profiles across all platforms. Paula has difficulties finding industrial engineers because they are in high demand and they do not apply for jobs.

Moreover, these profiles typically ask for a higher salary than the one on offer. In this case, Paula resorts to LinkedIn and actually does her own search there, and then on other platforms, if necessary. Subsequently, around ten candidates are invited for an interview where their hard and soft skills are assessed. The interviews are carried out in Spanish with an English language assessment. They normally last for about half an hour. After that, three to five candidates are chosen as finalists, meaning they are handed over to the manager from the client company. If the client firm decides to interview the candidate, he or she is given the name of the company and guidelines on how to prepare for the interview. It is essential that the candidate knows how to organize his/her speech at the interview. The recruiters ask the client firm and the candidates for feedback after the interview. If the client company hires one of the candidates, Spencer gets a fee.

**IT Power** is an IT and engineering outsourcing firm and recruitment agency that has offices in Spain, the UK China, and Asia. Offices in China and Asia offer support to client firms that need to oversee production and development while also serving as intermediaries between providers and manufacturers.

This company is the result of a relatively recent merger of several businesses, and that is why it works in several different ways, which makes it unique and very profitable. The emergence of this business strategy is a consequence of the changing corporations' needs with regard to outsourcing and the ability of the IT Power business strategists to notice these changes and build a structure that allows IT Power to capitalize on them.

IT Power provides outsourcing services to its clients like a standard outsourcing firm. A candidate that is hired by IT Power, has the contract with the IT Power but works on the premises of big corporations. In some cases, such employees eventually become part of the corporations' permanent staff. Another business line, which is also a form of outsourcing, is carrying out engineering or IT projects by teams of IT Power engineers. A client firm orders an entire product and IT Power develops it. As explained by Edgar, the manager, this kind of collaboration is profitable for companies because they do not have the infrastructure that allows them to develop these products themselves. Lack of infrastructure means that if they wanted to develop the product on their own, the company would have to make a lot of investments. IT Power has all the infrastructure and the manpower waiting for such collaborations. This is their margin for making profit.

They also buy a lot of software licences in cheaper packs, which can be used for a variety of projects.

The recruitment office manages recruitment for both the Development department that belongs to IT Power, and for the client companies that want an additional worker but are not willing to make him/her part of their company staff. Additionally, since the all the recruitment agency infrastructure is in place, it also functions as a typical Spencer-type recruitment office that matches job candidates with client firms. However, it is smaller in size, and it specializes in technical types of jobs in the IT and Engineering Sector.

Edgar is in charge of the IT Power recruitment branch with 24 employees. The recruitment office is split into two divisions. Unlike Spencer, there are special Sales people who do what a Spencer recruiter calls “the commercial part”. This means they have to secure new business collaborations. These employees always look like they are on a catwalk presenting the latest business suits produced by the best fashion designers. All the attributes of their physical appearance and their manner—their hairstyles, their faces, their voices, and the way they speak—are impeccable.

The second division is the recruiters who are in charge of the different types of recruitment processes outlined above. They always dress and behave more casually around the office. They put on a blazer and proper shoes before going on an interview, but they take them off as they come back to their office. They sound very professional on the phone and at interviews. As at Spencer, there is an open office plan in which recruiters share long desks which are organized so that they face each other. They put on headsets if they phone-screen people and move to an interview room if they do a Skype interview or need to escape from the office noise. The atmosphere is always lively and cheerful. Recruiters come and talk to each other or meet in the kitchen over lunch or coffee where they either discuss their work or their personal lives.

IT Power is in search of their own philosophy that would contribute to employees’ happiness at work and would motivate them to stay with the company long-term. They call their human resources division People to show that they value the input of each and every employee. Recruiters’ mission is not just to find workers for companies or the other way around. They are “accompanying talent to the opportunities that make them happy”. The value of the company as an outsourcer is also in the fact that once



employees are placed with a client firm, recruiters keep an eye on them and make sure they do their job properly. Also, that they are happy. If not, the workers are free to negotiate the projects that they are put on. The goal is to retain the worker who is already an IT Power employee and place him or her on another assignment, if necessary.

Recruiters are aware of how many recruitment processes they currently have in the department. One recruiter is in charge of distributing these processes equally among themselves. Guarantee of equal distribution is a chance for all the recruiters to earn the commission they receive with every single job placement (around 30% of their salary depends on their ability to close job processes). This does not imply competition. Recruiters often help each other find candidates. If candidates that they helped with get hired, the recruiter who sourced the candidate gets a part of the bonus fee. This tactic encourages teamwork and collaboration. In the year 2018, over one thousand projects were managed by the team.

#### **4.5 Ethics protocol**

The data generated for this project comes from individual job applicants seeking work and from workers at two private recruitment agencies. Taken the sensitive nature of the data and my obligation to protect the identities of the research sites and the people who have voluntarily participated in this study, I have taken all necessary measures in order to maintain their anonymity. The names of all firms and informants in this thesis are anonymized.

This project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the UAB in accordance with the ethics protocol that applies to ethnographic studies with qualitative research. For the purposes of data collection, two documents were designed, the project information sheet and the consent form. The project information sheet (included in *Appendix B*) outlines the general data on the project and the aims and goals of the study. It describes forms of cooperation between the researcher and the research sites, and handling of the data. The consent form overviews the time frame of data collection and presents explicit statements of what the informants were agreeing upon by signing it: being observed and recorded on the condition that access to the data would be limited to the researchers of the project, and that anonymity would be preserved. In addition, several options on subsequent treatment of the data obtained from the informants were

offered to them. They had to choose whether they would like to review the notes or transcripts, and whether they agreed to be quoted directly. There was also a specific reference to how the data may be used for academic purposes (in academic papers, spoken presentations etc.). The option to withdraw from the project was explicit in the consent form.

The project information sheet was included in the emails that were sent to companies from my official university email. When I started interviewing the individual job applicants in the study, I explained the information in the project information sheet and the consent form, gave the participants time to read through the forms independently and to choose the options suitable for them. Two copies of the consent forms were signed; one was for me to keep, and the other one, which contained my contact information, was for participants. For the first four interview observations at Spencer Junior, I introduced myself as a researcher and gave the candidates whose interviews I observed and the recruiters whom I interviewed the opportunity to sign the form. However, after the renegotiation of access with Valentina, she told me that showing the forms to the candidates was not an option for Spencer, and that they would rather ask candidates for an oral agreement. Spencer also decided that the company already had all the information they required and that recruiters did not have to sign additional forms. I had to agree to these conditions knowing that oral consent was also a common practice in the field and that it was also my duty to carry out careful and ethical research. To the candidates whose interviews I was going to observe, I introduced myself, explained my research and asked them if they accepted my observing the interview and taking notes. Before I did that, recruiters would ask candidates beforehand if they were okay with me being present at their interview. Only once did a candidate deny permission to observe her job interview when she was asked about it by the recruiter, while I was outside the interview room waiting to be let in. Later on, I learnt that she was offered the job.

There were also procedures at Spencer Junior that I was not allowed to record once I had renegotiated access with Valentina. When I contacted Spencer Senior, I attempted to show Marc all the documents I had, but he said it was not necessary because Spencer had already agreed to grant me access, therefore, legally everything was in order. I introduced myself to the informants the same way as at Spencer Junior with the only

exception that I asked candidates if they agreed to being recorded for research purposes. It was also common practice for recruiters to introduce me, explain what I was doing, and make candidates feel comfortable in my presence. Recruiters also offered candidates the opportunity to ask any questions they may have had about my research.

At IT Power, I also brought the Project Information Sheet and the Consent Form to the attention of Alfredo's boss Edgar. However, he said that the company had their own data protection policy and that these additional documents were not necessary. IT Power had me sign their own confidentiality agreement, explaining that the firm deals with patents or machines in development and that it was necessary to protect that information. The oral consent at the interview observations was obtained following the same procedure as at Spencer Senior. I introduced myself or was presented by the recruiter and asked for an explicit oral agreement to participate in the study. When the interviews took place on Business Skype, everything was done the same way as if the candidates had been in the office. I asked for their explicit agreement and I was introduced to the candidates on camera.

The candidates at Spencer and IT Power did not mind my presence at the interviews. They made explicit statements about their willingness to participate and to my knowledge and perception, it did not make them anxious. I noticed that they occasionally made eye contact with me during the interviews as they explained their biographies and work trajectories while recruiters would write down notes about these aspects. This was how I acknowledged that my presence was changing the reality I was observing. The interview rooms were small and private, therefore I always sat next to the recruiter. I tried to keep my head a bit down so that the candidate understood that they were talking to the recruiter. However, while the recruiters would write down their notes, the candidates would continue narrating their experience and make eye contact with me, from which I understood they were comfortable with me being present in the room. Furthermore, I noticed that once one recruiter switched the language of the interview from Catalan to Spanish because she thought I could not understand Catalan as well as Spanish. Recruiter Maribel made an explicit comment to the candidate that the interview language was Spanish and not Catalan because she thought it was better for me. The candidate agreed, but I suspected that both the recruiter and the candidate

would have chosen to speak Catalan if I had not been present in the room. After the interview, I approached her and said that she should not have to speak Spanish at the interview because of me and that I could perfectly understand Catalan. After that she spoke Catalan at the next interview. However, most of the interviews were carried out in Spanish, which was agreed upon with candidates in a non-explicit way.

It was commonly understood that pictures should not be taken in offices where recruiters worked. I took a few pictures of the entrance hall at Spencer and the interview rooms, in order to save the commercial information that was on the board in front of the entrance and the mottos in the interview rooms that represented the company values. I opted not to provide pictures in this thesis, as that might compromise anonymity of the firms that entrusted me with their sensitive information. However, I was allowed to take pictures of the recruiter's screens (in their presence and with explicit permission), and to keep copies of the job descriptions, job orders and curriculum vitae of the candidates. The documents of such kind that appear in the analysis chapters of this thesis were modified so as to protect the identities of the research sites and the participants. The information about the two research sites where I carried out fieldwork, provided in the section *Recruitment sites: Spencer and IT*, has also been slightly modified in order to protect their anonymity.

#### **4.6 Researcher's reflexivity: (Not) A fly on the wall**

The nature of this research has obliged me to direct my ethnographic gaze not just towards the object of this study, but also to my own position as a researcher and a person inside the professional recruitment context that included interaction with job candidates and recruiters (Heller, Pietikäinen, and Pujolar, 2018: 11). I acknowledge that my physical appearance, my personality and my conduct affected how I navigated this research and how I was perceived by the participants, which then had an impact on what kind of data I could collect and what the participants were willing to share. It also affected the things I noticed and the way I analysed them.

When I embarked on this project, I was 27 years old, which is considered a relatively young age in Spain. I am European (Belarusian) but not Spanish. I was quite fluent in Spanish and I had some basic knowledge of Catalan. I was in a dual role, that of a student and that of a university employee. My age went in line with this duality: I could pass for

a student but also for a teacher. The fact that I was recruiters' peer facilitated our communication. This was evident from the casual references to the things our generation shares and the cheerful conversations with recruiters during breaks. My rather fluent, lightly accented Spanish and my European and somewhat Nordic-looking physical appearance is usually a bit misleading with reference to my origins. I do not look Spanish, but Belarus is too small and too far away to be indexical in Spain (this was true before the political events of 2020). My accent in Spanish does not give away my national belonging to a particular language group. Most often people have identified me as being from Western and Northern Europe, for example, Britain, Holland, Denmark, Sweden, by my looks. At recruitment agencies, I must have been categorized with reference to the topic of my study, my professional affiliation and the fact that I speak English. My physical appearance does not go against me being an English speaker. In my experience, the questions about my origins are never the topic of the immediate conversation. Rather, some people get curious as they compliment me on my Spanish skills, assuming that I have lived in Spain for a long time, and they then ask me about my origins. This was the case at IT Power when one recruiter asked me where I was from. He got very keen on the fact that I am Belarusian and even said a few words that he knew in a Slavic language. The fact that my Spanish is rather fluent led me to believe that it did not play a role in accessing the sites.

Interviewing the job applicants on the subject of their recruitment experiences, was generally not a problem regardless of how well they knew me. Out of the 14 job applicants' interviews, a few could be described as friends because of the trust that we had built up over time. Some were acquaintances who, I knew, met the requirement for an interview because they had recently changed jobs. I got acquainted with two participants in the recruitment office at Spencer, and they were equally willing to be interviewed. The job applicants knew or saw me in my professional role as a teacher or a researcher. Knowing who I was and knowing the subject of my study, was enough for them to agree to share their recruitment-related stories.

My personal and unchangeable features, such as looks, age and gender, helped me to establish the initial contact with the recruitment agencies and helped me to navigate relationships with different recruiters once I was already part of their daily routine. However, in the moments that were key in negotiation with the recruitment agencies

and with the recruiters at the beginning of my fieldwork, all my personal and research skills were put to test. The highly competitive and time-sensitive recruitment context, which was reflected in the reasons companies and recruiters were providing as they rejected participation in the research, made me reconsider how I had to behave and what image I wanted to project so that it would help me, or at least that it would not prevent recruiters from participating in the study.

My dual role, that of a student and a university worker also helped me navigate the initial stages of fieldwork and to form a position from which I approached access negotiation. Recruiters initially promised to invite me to observe interviews, but they were less accommodating when I called to remind them about their verbal commitments. That is why I decided to be more corporately formal, business-like and more convincing when I talked to them. Instead of presenting myself as a student in need of help with data collection for my project, I instead emphasized that I *worked* at the university and that the research that I was carrying out was part of my job.

Most of the recruiters are graduates in Psychology. This was important because it is in their job description to evaluate people's profiles. I had to keep in mind that my gestures, my appearance, and how I talked or formulated my thoughts could have a meaning for them. At the same time, recruiters presented a professional front, so what they thought at a particular moment was not evident. Even though my role at the offices was not that of a job candidate, I felt I would be scrutinized through the prism of their professional skills, especially when I was in the role of the interviewer towards them. I wanted to project an image of a good professional, or a profile they would like, and hopefully, be willing to help.

Strategically, I made an effort to look and seem corporately professional and likeable. Also, if I was going to be on the premises of the recruitment agencies, it was better not to stand out, as I would be part of the image of the recruitment agency. Recruiters could not be ashamed to present me to their interviewees, and since I was in their office, I had to keep up their reputation. To the offices, I always wore a blazer, a shirt, formal trousers and loafers which made me look corporate. At the same time, this look did not contradict with my research identity. When I had very important interviews, as the one with an owner of a headhunting company, I would add an expensive watch to the formal look. This was what recruiters also did.

In person, I always introduced myself (or was introduced) as a pre-doctoral researcher doing fieldwork project about the role of English skills in recruitment. I would add that I was interested in the interview parts where English skills are talked about and assessed, and in the jobs that came with an English requirement in order to understand what kinds of jobs needed English skills. Some recruiters would confess that they were not great at English, and I believe it was partly because they knew I was from the English philology department. However, they quickly understood that my focus was more on the requirement for English and I was not there to evaluate their job performance. If anything, they may have thought I was there to look at the situation with English skills among candidates. I came to this conclusion because the recruiters shared their concern that school and university education was not providing enough training in English and that they were having a hard time finding candidates who possess good English knowledge. It was as if they hoped I was sent by university to solve this situation. They dealt with the English skills requirement on a daily basis, and it was critical to their job that they find more candidates with English skills, because they could make more business out of it. The fact that there were not enough candidates with good English was considered problematic for their own recruitment agenda.

One of my priorities in my position as a researcher who was looking into language skills was not making the recruiters uncomfortable when being observed. They felt less insecure by knowing the focus was more on the language and less on them. I noticed it by observing how they introduced me to the candidates and how they always pointed out it was about the language. The candidates seemed calm. The language part of the research made a lot of sense to them because the topic of English skills is part of the national discourse. The candidates whose interviews I came to observe were rather friendly towards me. Some of them said in private conversation that it was time for someone like me to start looking into what was happening with the jobs and English skills.

Initially, I was an outsider to the recruitment firms and the recruiters who worked there. It was a pressure-intensive environment with the big time constraints, and one of the difficulties I had anticipated was making sure that dealing with me was not going to alter recruiters' work routine. The research design is conditioned by the access constraints and the strategic decisions I took in order to adapt my research agenda to

how the work was organized at recruitment agencies. In the pre- or post-interview observation chats with recruiters I had to be aware of the time they could dedicate to talking to me. The very format of these chats was a way to wrap my research around their busy schedule so I could learn more about their work, interviews, companies and their assessment of candidates. I had to ask them to bring or allow me to make copies of curriculum vitae or job offers so that I would not have to bother them later. At Spencer Junior, Alfredo managed recruiters' communications with me and the schedule of interview observations. He kept track of the interviews I attended and other activities, such as phone screening, that I observed. He was the one who greeted me in the office and the one who saw me off. When I was at Spencer Senior, nobody worried about me, the time I spent in the Spencer office, or security concerns, because they knew how I worked and what information I was seeking. I was trusted. However, both at Spencer Senior and IT Power, I was very careful with how I approached recruiters and how much of their time I was taking. I always asked how much time recruiters could dedicate to talking to me, and I made sure I did not waste their time. In this sense, I also felt the sense of urgency they had in their jobs.



# Analysis

## **Chapter 5 Value of English and Other Languages in the Spanish Labour Market**

The present chapter investigates the construction of value for English and other language skills and the rationalities behind the language criterion in recruitment agencies' selection processes. English and other language skills have value because they are associated with economic gains for organisations and for individuals. Companies believe that language skills bring them profits through their usefulness in work processes, or as an asset that provides flexibility and makes workers more productive. The language skills value for individuals lies in the promise of material gain in the form of salary, or in language skills serving as a competitive advantage in work contexts, including hiring.

The discourses about the economic value of English shape the practices at recruitment agencies, who treat it as an indispensable skill. By setting up a language criterion, they transform and structure the ways people gain access to jobs. Recruitment agencies also create new discourses in which English is presented as a skill that is "missing" from the labour market. The artificially created demand for a high level of the English competence combined with its reported scarcity among the highly qualified professionals reinforces the position of the recruitment businesses as a labour market intermediary and allows them to make profit using the value of English skills. According to Cappelli (2012), the skills gaps are typically the consequence of recruitment practices rather than the candidates actually lacking the skills they would need to carry out their job.

The construction of the English skills requirement takes place in the recruitment agencies, where it is included in the job announcements that get published on the recruitment companies' webpages. This requirement is usually framed as "high" or "indispensable". This articulation allows agencies to treat English skills in two distinct ways depending on the specific job function and the salary the client is willing to pay. The English requirement represents two different sets of value that are known to the recruiter. English skills may be a requirement because they are essential for a given job, or they may have a symbolic added value when they are not necessarily instrumental,

therefore producing a contradiction between the requirement criteria and the use of these skills on the job. According to Roberts (2021), language skills competence should not be a requirement unless it is necessary for carrying out a job.

Further consideration of the value of English skills brings us to a discussion of the bargaining role that is assigned to them in recruitment processes. The positions that require English are generally considered to be better remunerated. However, the skill is used by recruitment agents as a negotiation tool, and the requirement may be changed in order to meet the client's salary expectations. The English skills that add to the monetary benefit for a potential employee only correspond to the level that has been deemed valuable by the recruiter. Otherwise, the candidate may be penalized for the lacking competence.

Finally, this chapter compares the value of other language skills with that of English skills. In cases where another language is required in addition to English, English skills are considered essential to the job, while the second language is often a symbolic addition or a plus. Typically, the second language is required due to the location of the company's headquarters. However, the second language is not orally assessed by recruitment agencies during the interview process, and the level that defines eligibility for a profession is lower than that of English skills.

### **5.1 The English skills gap**

English is one of the top skills in demand and in shortage in the Spanish labour market. The discourse about the missing English competence is produced by the Spanish recruitment agencies, and this message is reinforced by the national media, which insist on the link between English skills and employment possibilities (covered in Chapter 1, *The Spanish Labour Market and English Skills*). This section explores the English skills gap from inside the recruitment agencies Spencer and IT Power, in order to find out what it consists in and why job candidates' English competence is not sufficient to get a job.

Recruitment agencies are the spaces where the English skills gap is visible through recruiters' judgements about their candidate search experiences. Paula is a recruiter at Spencer Junior who specializes in positions for the Logistics and Engineering sectors. Paula explains that her job is harder because the candidates' English is not good enough:

### **Extract 5.1**

PAU: Here in Spain, we have a big problem with this. Because people don't speak English good enough. We have a salary guide, and every year we publish it, and it's very interesting because it says the customers need high level of English for a lot of jobs we recruit for, but the truth is the candidates don't have this level of English you know, because the education here it's not, it's not not investing e: in English so it's contradictory. The companies need a very high level of English but the school, the universities don't provide this. What can we do? Pay particular, private classes, go to UK or Canada for learning English, yeah, ok, but that's... So, for us recruiters it's very hard because you have a good profile, CV is correct, you know the skills are correct but the person don't speak English.

Semi-structured interview, recruiter Paula, Spencer Junior, 09/05/2017

Paula points to the contradiction that is created by the discrepancy between the poor level of English provided by the education system and the high demand for that same skill. She readily admits that the level of English required by companies is higher than what the candidates can offer. Individual efforts to learn English in private academies also fall short of the required level. The main problem with the candidates in Engineering that she typically works with is their insufficient speaking skills, which prevents her from sending these candidates to be interviewed by clients.

According to Melanie, a recruiter from Spencer who specializes in Retail, it is very difficult to find someone who speaks good English in Barcelona. Clients usually ask for English when Melanie looks for store managers for shops or shopping centres that are located in the city centre:

### **Extract 5.2**

MEL: Honestly, I have to tell you that here in Barcelona it's something, it's very difficult nowadays to find someone who can speak very good or very fluent English... So, it's a shame, because I have really good profiles, but the candidates don't speak English. So, I feel frustrated and imagine maybe the candidate as well, they know that they have less chances to work in these places because in Retail a lot of people, the dream is to work in Paseo de Gracia. And in Paseo de Gracia they have to speak English okay.

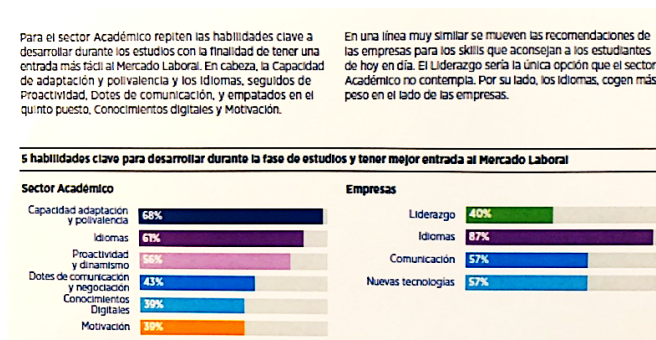
Semi-structured interview, recruiter Melanie, Spencer Junior, 25/10/2017

The feeling of frustration and desperation, expressed by recruiter Melanie, is a common sentiment among recruiters as they struggle to find the candidates with the right skills, that is, fluent English. The English skills gap is understood by Paula and

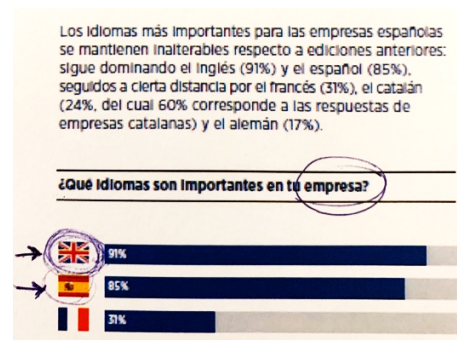
Melanie as the inability by candidates in the Engineering and the Retail sectors to communicate well in English.

According to an internal report elaborated by Spencer, private companies and the education sector have different understandings of the value of language skills in the contemporary labour market. According to the document in Figure 5.1, which is based on the questionnaire filled out by the academic sector and private companies, in the context of access to the labour market, language skills are more valued by the companies (87%) than they are by the academic sector (67%). These estimations may be one explanation for why education does not seemingly provide people with the right language skills. According to Caballero, Vázquez, and Quintás, (2015: 399), the Spanish university education system fails to provide the right skills, including language skills, that would match the current professional demands.

**Figure 5.1**  
Key Skills for Job Access



**Figure 5.2**  
Valued Languages



**Translation of Figures 5.1; 5.2**

*Figure 5.1*

*For the academic sector, the key skills to be developed in education with the goal to gain access to the labour market are listed. First, is the ability to adapt and versatility, and the languages, followed by proactivity, communicative abilities and in the last position is motivation.*

*In a similar vein, come the recommendations by companies for the skills that are recommended for students today. Leadership is the only skill that the academic sector does not contemplate. Languages, on the other side, are more important for companies.*

*Figure 5.2*

*The most important language for the Spanish companies remains unchanged as compared to the previous editions: English keeps dominating (91%), and Spanish (85%), followed at a distance by French (31%), Catalan (24%, out of which 60% are answers by Catalan firms), and German (17%).*

**What the important languages in your firm?**

*English 91%*

<b>5 key skills to develop during the period of studies for a better access to the labour market.</b>	Spanish 85%
	French 31%
<b>Academic Sector</b>	
Ability to adapt and versatility	68%
Languages	67%
Proactivity and dynamism	56%
Communication and negotiation and abilities	43%
Digital skills	39%
Motivation	39%
<b>Companies</b>	
Leadership	40%
Languages	87%
Communication	57%
New technology	57%

Department documents, Spencer, 09/05/2017

The Spencer document provided in Figure 5.2 shows that English is even more important than Spanish for the companies that operate in Spain. According to Paula (Spencer Junior), in each department of every company in Spain, there are only a small number of employees that are fluent in English, and this represents a problem for businesses. This judgement reflects the discourse created by language teaching corporations such as Cambridge that state that language skills gaps in companies' employees represent a problem for businesses.

Furthermore, the yearly labour market report by Spencer states that the decade-long crisis has kept Spain unable to recover from high unemployment, which is triple that of other European countries. According to this report, education has to become more flexible, and the "improved adaptation of worker skills to meet company needs is essential in order to build the balanced, sustainable model that is the vision of the future. Flexibility is watchword, with the areas of contract legislation and education and training potential areas for improvement" (Spencer labour market report, 2017). Among the key profiles sought by Spanish companies are: sales people and industrial engineers with foreign language skills.

Thus, the recruitment agency Spencer sees the English skills gap as the problem of candidates and the academic sector, which cannot meet the growing demand for these skills. While recruiter Stella from Spencer Senior also supports this view, she points out

that the high-level English skills requirement is the result of the rapid change in the labour market that occurred due to globalization:

### Extract 5.3

STE: Antes/ el inglés/, el tenerlo era que pudieras ser el mejor de los demás/, pero es que a día de hoy no tenerlo es que pierdas oportunidades\. Por tanto creo que es indispensable\. Y que además creo que hay un error, y es que las personas no estamos formadas/ con el nivel de inglés que el mercado exige, es decir, el mercado ha cambiado de una manera muy rápida/, y hay un gap de personas\ que tienen entre te diría entre (.) 27, 28 años hasta los (.) 55 no, que no tienen ese nivel de inglés que, que el mercado exige. Eh eh o o mentira, que sí lo tienen/ es porque se han formado e:h fuera/ de de lo que es la educación reglada, no, por tanto para mí hay un problema de base que es qué educación reglada se ha dado para que el mercado esté exigiendo un nivel de inglés, que no se tiene\, entonces si realmente yo creo que y desde mi visión/ e, hay un problema de, e, educación/, creo que las empresas lo que pueden hacer (.) o lo que tenían que hacer es brindarle a sus profesionales, que por lo que sea, en su momento no requerían este nivel pero ahora sí/, porque se ha globalizado todo/ y porque a diario tenemos que tratar con personas en inglés, brindarle como por ejemplo hace **\*\*Spencer**, no, con clases cada semana en inglés/

### Translation Extract 5.3

STE: *Before/ having English/ meant that you could be the best of the others/, but nowadays not having it means that you lose opportunities\. So, I think it is indispensable\. And I also think that it is a mistake that people are not trained/ with the level of English that the market demands, that is to say, the market has changed in a very quick way/, and there is a gap of people\ who are between (.) 27, 28 up to (.) 55 years old no, who do not have the level of English that the market demands. Eh eh or, or that's a lie, if they have/ it is because they have been trained e:h outside/ of of what is formal education, no, therefore in my opinion there is a root problem which is the formal education that has been given so that the market is demanding a level of English, which is not there\, so if I really believe that, and in my vision/ e there is a problem of, e, education/, I think what companies can do (.) or have to do is to offer their professionals, which for whatever reason, at that time they did not require this level but now they do/, because everything/ has become globalised and because we have to deal with people in English on a daily basis, to offer them, as for example **\*\*Spencer** does, no, with classes every week in English/*

Semi-structured interview, recruiter Stella, Spencer Elite, 16/10/2018

According to Stella, the age group that does not meet the requirement represents the whole candidate pool, except for the job-seekers under 27, who most probably are not applying for their jobs through Spencer. This points to a major problem where the whole labour force is deemed unqualified as it lacks English skills. Following Stella's comment about the rapid change in the labour market that led to change in the requirement, the English skills gap should be linked to the kinds of jobs emerging in

Barcelona, as well as considered as one of the outcomes of the recruitment practice, where the language skills criterion itself has become unreasonable. Similarly, Cappelli (2012) argues that skills gaps are often a false reason for why people cannot become employed while countries worldwide have large candidate pools and are experiencing high unemployment. The truth about skills gaps is that companies have overly high expectations for their future employees, and the job requirements have become very detailed and often excessive. Furthermore, companies are often unwilling to pay accordingly for the skills they require.

Recruiters from IT Power who specialize in Engineering and IT admit that it is not easy to find candidates with a combination of technical skills and English because these profiles are very expensive:

#### Extract 5.4

MAR: Aquí es cierto, es que aquí en España/ (.) encontrar el mix entre un muy buen nivel técnico\ y un muy buen nivel de inglés/ cuesta. Y los que encuentran son muy caros. Por qué, porque trabajan en un proyecto internaciona:l/, normalmente se tienen que desplaza:r/, y eso sube mucho su, su precio. (.) Vale?. Entonces es mas fácil encontrarlos fuera de España\. Es mucho más fácil, también es verdad/ que en este caso en el que son proyectos internaciona:les donde se trabaja de forma remo:ta y demás aquí en España pues aún no está tan implementado como en otros países/, (...) en Holanda por ejemplo, está mucho más implementa:do, en, en Alemania está mucho más implementa:do.

#### Translation of Extract 5.4

MAR: *It is true that here in Spain/ (.) it is difficult to find a mix between a good technical\ level and a very good level of English/. And those that are found are very expensive. Because, because they work on an interna:tional/ project, they usually have to mo:ve/, and that raises their, their price a lot. (.) Ok? So it is easier to find them out of Spain\. It is much easier, it is also true/ that in this case in which they are interna:tional projects where you work remo:tely and so on here in Spain it is still not as implemented as in other countries/, (...) in Holland for example, it is much more impleme:nted, in Germany it is much more impleme:nted.*

Semi-structured interview, Sales Representative Maribel, IT Power, 17/04/2019

Engineers and IT experts who work on international projects are very valuable in the Spanish labour market. In accordance with business logic, it then becomes easier to hire workers among the mobile workforce with the same set of skills at a cheaper price and even implement remote forms of work. Thus, the language skills gap in Spain actually

represents the lack of “affordable” profiles with good English skills rather than an absolute lack of candidates who possess them.

Recruiters have more difficulties finding candidates with both technical and English skills in smaller cities in Spain, where some companies are establishing subsidiaries. Maribel is managing a project that looks for candidates for a subsidiary of a well-established firm called “Sports Things” located in Zaragoza. She points out that there is a difference in labour supply between large cities like Barcelona and smaller cities like Zaragoza. However, the implementation of remote work makes it possible to find suitable profiles more easily thanks to the ability to tap into larger pools of foreign talent:

### Extract 5.5

MAR: Vale pues por ejemplo, e:: unos proyectos internacionales que tengo es con \*\* Sport Things. \*\* Sport Things, ellos por ejemplo físicamente están en Zaragoza, en Zaragoza la verdad que la oferta técnica que hay es muy limitada. (...) Aquí en Barcelona te va a ser mucho más fácil pues porque aquí hay mucho cruce cultural, hay mucha gente que viene de fuera, y se ha implementado también pues con toda la creación por ejemplo en área más técnica de IT con la implementación de 22@ donde vinieron muchos startups con inicio en Silicon Valley, es decir con toda la capa de management e::, Americana. Al crearse aquí, ya se involucró mucho o se captó mucho perfil más internacional o con tendencia hacia una función más internacional porque al fin y al cabo el negocio sigue estando en Estados Unidos. Y la interlocución sigue siendo con la headquarter. Entonces se ha ido creando aparte de que mucha gente ha venido a Barcelona pues atraída por este hub tecnológico que tenemos y este cruce multicultural, el 22@, es un hub tecnológico que tenemos aquí en Barcelona (...) entonces eso ha hecho que aquí en Barcelona estemos más ricos en temas multiculturales. Y en Madrid igual. E::, pero bueno, otras zonas de España pues donde la inversión técnica o la presencia de compañías tecnológicas no es la misma que aquí, pues también, obvio, y va de la mano no hay tanta disponibilidad de perfiles tan cualificados. (...) En Zaragoza lo que pasa es que no hay mucho recurso técnico, al que poder acudir. Vale es normalmente la gran mayoría de gente que estudia en Zaragoza acaba trabajando en Barcelona o en Madrid. Porque allí no hay mucha oferta, entonces cuando vas a buscar un perfil tan técnico y tan internacional, allí obvio no lo vas a encontrar. De tal manera que entonces \*\*Sport Things se apoya en nosotros, igual que en otras consultoras, para que vayamos a otros puntos de España incluso fuera de España, a buscar recursos para que puedan trabajar por ellos de esta forma. A ellos les da igual que sea presencial o no, están trabajando de forma remota, con metodologías Scrum, metodologías ágiles que les permite encadenar.

### Translation of Extract 5.5

MAR: *Well, for example, some international projects I have are with \*\* Sport Things. \*\* Sport Things, for example, they are physically located in Zaragoza, in Zaragoza the truth is that the technical offer is very limited. (...) Here in Barcelona it is going to be much easier because*



*here there is a lot of cultural crossover, there are many people coming from abroad, and it has also been implemented with all the creation for example in the more technical area of IT with the implementation of 22@ where many start-ups came from Silicon Valley, that is to say with all the management e.::, (being) American. When it was created here, they got involved a lot or they captured a lot of more international profiles with a tendency towards more international because at the end of the day the business is still in the United States. And the interlocution continues to be with the headquarters. So, apart from the fact that many people have come to Barcelona because they have been attracted by this technological hub that we have and this multicultural mix, the 22@, it is a technological hub that we have here in Barcelona (...) so this has meant that here in Barcelona we are richer in multicultural issues. And the same in Madrid. E.::, but well, other areas of Spain where the technical investment or the presence of technological companies is not the same as here, well it's also obvious and it goes hand in hand there is not much availability of such qualified profiles. (...) In Zaragoza what happens is that there are not a lot of technical resources to turn to. So normally the majority of people who study in Zaragoza end up working in Barcelona or Madrid. Because there is not much on offer there, so when you are looking for such a technical and international profile, you are not going to find it there. In this way, \*\*Sport Things relies on us, as well as other consultancy firms, to go to other parts of Spain, even outside Spain, to look for resources so that they can work for them in this way. They don't care if it is in-person or not, they are working remotely, with Scrum methodologies, agile methodologies that allow them to manage.*

Semi-structured interview, recruiter Maribel, IT Power, 17/04/2019

Victoria from IT Power explains that the main difficulty in finding a person for Engineering and IT positions is associated with the English requirement, because professionals in these areas do not typically have the advanced knowledge of English as they do not need to communicate as much due to the nature of their work:

### **Extract 5.6**

VIC: Aquí sí que hay muchos programadores, pero qué pasa, que hay muchos proyectos, que como es todo muy técnico, quizás no necesitan tanto el tema de: de: comunicarse, pues como menos importante. Entonces hay muchos perfiles que no:, que no necesitan inglés, entonces hay perfiles muy buenos que yo pienso “ostras, muy bueno, pero luego a lo mejor no tiene inglés”. Entonces para esta posición sí que me piden porque claro, xxx \*\*Fly With Me tiene la central creo que en Alemania, entonces esta persona va a tener que ir allá.

### **Translation of Extract 5.6**

VIC: *There are a lot of programmers here, but what happens is that many projects, since everything is very technical, maybe they don't need to communicate so much, so it is less important. So there are many profiles that do:n't, that don't need English, so there are some very good profiles that I think “wow, very good, but maybe they don't have English”. So for this position they do ask me because, of course, xxx \*\*Fly With Me has its headquarters in Germany, I think, so this person is going to have to go there.*

Short conversation, recruiter Victoria, IT Power, 27/03/2019

When looking for a position of Java Software Engineer (Image 5.3) for a pharmaceutical company, with an annual salary between 30 and 39 thousand euro—which is well above average in Catalonia—Victoria chooses to prioritize English skills over the technical profile of a candidate as there are no available candidates with English skills.

### Image 5.3 Job Announcement

Working in an international team with Scrum Methodology.

REQUISITOS: English is mandatory

Your task: You will collaborate with end-users, mainly in Germany and Austria, and with IT colleagues in small virtual teams globally.

IT Power, 27/03/2019

### Extract 5.7

VIC: Vale, es para una posición para el cliente \*\*Fly With Me que es cliente farmacéutico, entonces nos han pedido a alguien pues que pueda hablar en en inglés, porque el parte del equipo que está en Austria y en Alemania. Entonces me está costando muchísimo encontrar gente que hable en inglés, y el otro día buscando por Info Jobs hace ya días, e: encontré este perfil. Es muy junior, vale, yo en verdad quiero alguien más senior\. Pero como me ponen por aquí que tiene Inglés, ves? Avanzado, Inglés avanzado, entonces le mandé un mensaje, y me ha dicho que sí, que le puede interesar.

### Translation of Extract 5.7

VIC: *Okay, it is for a position for our client \*\*Fly With Me, which is a pharmaceutical client, so they have asked us for someone who can speak English, because part of the team is in Austria and Germany. So I am having a hard time finding people who speak English, and the other day I was looking through Info Jobs, and I e: found this profile. It is very junior, okay, I actually want someone more senior\. But as it says here that he has English, you see? Advanced, advanced English, so I sent him a message, and he said yes, he might be interested.*

Short conversation, recruiter Victoria, IT Power, 27/03/2019

The candidate that was found for this position is Bulgarian. Before the phone screening and during the call with the candidate, Victoria expresses the judgement that the candidate's English must be good *because* he is Bulgarian.

### Extract 5.8

- VIC: Vale, e:, otra pregunta ya por tener un poco más de información, veo por aquí que tienes inglés avanzado?
- SAM: sí, bastante avanzado.
- VIC: vale, porque de:: de dónde eres?
- SAM: de Bulgaria.
- VIC: vale o sea que ningún problema con el inglés. Vale, e:, genial, pues me guardo todo esto, y en todo caso e cuando tenga una posición que quizás te pueda encajar de ubicación o de remoto, te volvería a contactar, de acuerdo?
- SAM: okay, gracias.

### Translation of Extract 5.8

- VIC: *Ok, e:, another question for a bit more information, I see here that you have advanced English?*
- SAM: *yes, quite advanced.*
- VIC: *ok, because whe::re where are you from?*
- SAM: *from Bulgaria.*
- VIC: *ok so no problem with English. Ok, e:, great, so I'll keep all this, and in any case when I have a position that might fit you, by location or remotely, I would get back to you, ok?*
- SAM: *okay, thank you.*

Phone-screening, recruiter Victoria, IT Power, 27/03/2019

Candidates of different nationalities, such as Poles, Romanians, and Bulgarians are usually assumed to have good English skills. They are at a competitive advantage with respect to Spanish nationals because they offer the required level of English skills while Spanish profiles in the same salary range do not have a comparable level of English competence. The judgements recruiters make about these foreign candidates' English skills are based on their recruitment experience, which is why the English skills of candidates from these countries are not questioned or validated on the phone.

The job posts that require spoken English skills but offer lower pay also rely on candidates from other European countries that are willing to take the jobs for less money. At Spencer, I attend a phone screening with Angela, a recruiter who works on retainer for a shared service centre, filling Customer Service and Sales positions. The position in question is that of Helpdesk First Line Support with a C1 English requirement, which is a hybrid role combining customer support and first-level technical support. English is needed for this role in order to attend to incoming calls from France, UK/Ireland, and Scandinavia. In addition, the manager is French and does not speak Spanish. Angela states that she can find good English speakers in Poland, Romania, and

Eastern Europe in general, but not so much in Spain. In her view, it would be ideal to have a Spaniard as a candidate for these kinds of jobs, because there would be no need to relocate, however, she inevitably has to look for candidates outside Spain in order to fill some positions. The pay that the position offers is also below average at 23 thousand euro annually. Subsequently, Angela contacts two candidates from Poland and the UK by phone. The requirement for English is C1, but there is also a German requirement. When the call ends, Angela mentions that she has another candidate who is German. Because of the required competence in English and German, Spanish profiles are not present in the candidate pool.

This section has focused on the English language skills gap that is linked to the English requirement for the jobs available at recruitment agencies. The English skills gap is represented by the insufficient verbal competence, as reported by recruiters, that is characteristic for the whole Spanish labour force, which includes the older generation of workers that received their training under different labour market conditions. These labour market conditions are, in fact, a direct consequence of this gap. Nevertheless, the blame for the inadequacy of candidates' skills for the jobs on offer is placed on the candidates themselves. They are expected to be flexible and to adapt rapidly to the changes in the economic conditions that regulate access to work. Formal education also receives part of the blame for the inability to estimate the companies' need for English skills and for not providing the adequate university training for the future workers.

Recruiters express frustration that the English requirement forces them to carry out more complicated searches. However, they do not seem to question the legitimacy of companies' need for English skills and simultaneously fail to link the English skills gap to their own recruitment practices. Further consideration of the English skills gap reveals that it is also a consequence of companies access to the mobile international workforce, members of which have the skills companies require, and they may be available at a more affordable rate than local talent.

Recruiters at Spencer and IT Power turn to a non-Spanish candidate pool when they need to find a combination of a technical expertise and English skills. The positions for which it is more difficult to find candidates may be located away from cosmopolitan cities like Barcelona or Madrid, where not just English skills but also people with the required professional skills are difficult to find. Lastly, good English skills are sometimes

required for rather low-paying positions, which forces recruiters look for candidates abroad or seek out young native English- or German-speakers who live in Spain and are in a position to accept these jobs.

## 5.2 Barcelona business allure

This section investigates how the demand for English skills and other languages is created by the new businesses which are settling in Barcelona.

In the post 2008 economic crisis, Catalonia has made important efforts to create jobs by attracting foreign investment. It became a pioneer for new business models such as shared service centres, for which various benefits, tax rebates, and grant incentives were created. Shared service centres are offices that transfer operations of specific units—for example IT, Finance, and the HR of company subsidiaries—into one centralized office:

### Extract 5.9

MON: They (companies) used to work in really local areas, so in each country they used to have er, marketing specialists, IT support and let's say like a recruiter, just an example, so the idea of shared service centre is to share all these areas so, er, they build like an office with global services, like global, they provide globally, so the idea is just to er, from a very local way to work, they put like in a global one. So, they establish just one office, one building with four different areas, mainly IT, human resource, marketing and finance.

Semi-structured interview, Monica, Johnson 01/10/2017

Barcelona is promoting itself as an ideal business location in terms of cost-efficiency, logistics and international talent, represented by highly qualified European nationals, such as Italians, Romanians, French and Germans. Moreover, the trade and investment initiative promotes Barcelona as a location to which the labour force would willingly choose to relocate for the things Barcelona has to offer, such as the lifestyle, and the higher quality of life (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2021).

Recruitment agencies manage job positions for shared service centres. Marc, a recruiter specializing in Finance and Head of Spencer Senior, has a background in consulting. He explains that consulting firms, like the one he used to work for, carry out market research for businesses that wish to relocate in order to reduce business costs. Among the countries in Europe that companies consider for relocation are Poland,

Spain, and Portugal, because these countries are considered cheap for maintaining business. Marc explains that relocation to Poland is technically even cheaper, but the climate and the possibility of attracting necessary workers are less favourable. Shared service centres, several multinational companies, and companies in the IT sector, have chosen Barcelona because Spain has better weather, and there are better chances of attracting international talent. The language requirement in such shared centres is an advanced level of English and proficiency in another European language. This requirement for language skills is linked to how shared service centres operate.

### Extract 5.10

MAR: Es imprescindible, o sea el idioma oficial de la empresa es el inglés, su día a día es el inglés. Si que igual pues con el compañero puedes hablar en castellano, en español si ellos lo hablan, pero las comunicaciones internas son en inglés. Entonces (...) es el idioma oficial de la empresa. Y trabajan siempre en inglés (...) porque son equipos multinacionales. Porque él trabaja, él gestiona tres-cuatro personas, que hay chicos alemanes, polacos, austriacos, después habrá un equipo de gente francesa. Y el requerimiento es que hablen francés, por si tienen que tener contacto telefónico con alguien, con un proveedor que no está pagando en Francia, con un cliente que ha tenido una incidencia y está en Francia, ¿Vale? Y el inglés como idioma oficial vale para la comunicación que vale hacemos el reporting, lo hacemos en inglés. Así es el idioma que todo el mundo entiende.

### Translation of Extract 5.10

MAR: *It is indispensable, well the official language of the company is English, his day-to-day is English. Yes, equally well with a colleague you can speak Castilian, Spanish if they speak it, but the internal communications are in English. So (...) it is the official language of the firm. And they always work in English (...) because they are multinational teams. Because he works, he manages three-four people, there are German guys, Polish, Austrian, then there would be a French team. And the requirement is that they speak French, in case they need to establish telephone communication with someone, with a provider that is not paying in France, with a client that has had an incident and is in France, ok? And English as an official language ok for communication that ok we do reporting, we do it in English. This way it is the language everyone understands.*

Post-interview conversation, recruiter Marc, Spencer Senior, 10/10/2018

The official language in shared service centres is English. They are usually very strict with the English requirement, and, according to recruiter Marc, workers are supposed to communicate with each other only in English. Marc admits that one company of Spanish origin that has a shared service centre in Barcelona is less strict with the language employees use when they communicate with each other.

Besides English, an additional European language is also required because each of the units in such shared centre covers operations for a group of European countries. That is why these workers may have the need to communicate with France, as is pointed out in Extract 5.10. Antonio, the candidate who works at a shared service centre and attends an interview with recruiter Marc, leads a team of three or four people that manage operations for Germany and Poland. On his team there is at least one native German-speaker and a native Polish-speaker. Antonio is 46 years old, he earns 42 thousand euro a year at the shared service centre, but he is looking for a new job because the company itself is not doing very well. In order to work in a shared service centre, a professional in Finance is required to have advanced English and another European language. The cost reduction for companies comes at a price for the professionals in Barcelona who are required to have advanced skills in two foreign languages in order to gain access to such positions.

The global hubs created in Barcelona by big multinational corporations follow a similar business logic to that of the shared service centres. Angel, an HR consultant at a multinational company called “Tasty Co”, is in a long hiring process for a global technological hub that aims to employ a total of 400 people. The technological hub is intended to provide technological solutions, such as the updating and building of new applications used by “Tasty Co”. However, “Tasty Co” does not only employ developers or IT engineers, but also employees with a background in marketing, who are now focusing on e-commerce and analysis of consumer behaviour. The global hub is only focused on tasks that pertain to global operations. This means that teams of workers are assembled in order to cover operations for countries or regions.

#### **Extract 5.11**

ANG: They are working from here for different countries, it depends on about the project, about the team, about the languages that they talk as well, because most of them they are focused more about the languages that they can talk, and giving support to different countries. For example with Brazil it happens a lot, because we have a lot of Brazilians here, they are working mostly for the Portuguese market, so it depends, it's organized depends the urgency, the projects and also timings, about different time between countries.

Semi-structured interview, recruiter Angel, Tasty Co, 06/11/2018

For this hub, candidates are selected worldwide and relocated to Barcelona. The company even offers small relocation packages to attract workers. The initial idea behind the global hub was to hire the highly qualified applicants already located in Barcelona, however this recruitment strategy was soon changed either because of a lack of candidates with technical expertise, language skills, or both. The company decided to create an international team instead.

#### **Extract 5.12**

ANG: We also have to go abroad because for us it's very easy to go to Barcelona, to find people, and but we are, we found that is not easy to hire people in Barcelona. So, for that reason I think that we have to go abroad, and is more difficult because we have to sell better because for example we have people here from different countries.

Semi-structured interview, recruiter Angel, Tasty Co, 06/11/2018

The hub now consists of professionals belonging to around 50 nationalities who are all located in Spain, but they cover global operations. Very few Spanish job candidates are selected for these jobs, which Angel justifies by the fact that the teams are truly international.

#### **Extract 5.13**

ANG: We take into consideration international profiles, er, before than the Spanish profiles, it's true that depends the audiency, we start working in the Spanish, in the Spanish market, but we are not closed at all, e::, to bring people from er, from outside from abroad. Errm, the reason is because we want to build an international team, and this is the reason. Now we will be around 40 nationalities, or 50 nationalities here, different languages. (...) it's true that we go first out abroad, or at the same time, but our managers most of them they are not from Spain, they are from different countries, and they are based now here, but they were based maybe in the headquarter in Switzerland, or in different countries already working for \*\*Tasty Co, so they are more open to the Spanish managers here too::, to to work with people from different countries, mostly just to be diverse and to:, to build like I said before, e: international team. Because anyway it's a global hub. So we don't want to work just with e:, just with people from here, or Spanish speakers.

Semi-structured interview, recruiter Angel, Tasty Co, 06/11/2018

Advanced English is a requirement for all positions in the Tasty Co hub. Spanish people may become candidates if they meet the requirement. Most of them, however, are screened out in the first screening round based on the English skills requirement.



After that, Angel calls the remaining candidates and short-lists them for phone interviews. Angel states that he also eliminates candidates who do not match the English skills requirement after the phone screening. He points out that all candidates from Asia or South America have good English on the phone, while he finds lower English skills among the Spanish, the Italians, and the French, who are eliminated from the recruitment process as a result.

The case of the shared service centres and the global hub shows how companies, attracted by the tax incentives provided by the local government, choose Barcelona as a business destination with the logic of saving costs. As a result, offices that cover global operations for corporations rely on the international talent attracted into the city, as well as on the multilingual skills of their employees to keep these business structures viable. The English requirement is mandatory for these business projects because the teams assembled are international, which means that English is going to be used for communication amongst the employees. The jobs created in Barcelona this way cannot solve the local unemployment problem as there is lack of Spanish nationals with the required technical or language skills expertise.

The English skills requirement emerges in other sectors as well, since the influx of an international workforce in Barcelona creates spaces where there is a need for infrastructure to accommodate it. Recruiter Melanie from Spencer's retail division admits that the English skills requirement in her specialization is related to the growth of new international business areas that attract foreign people:

#### **Extract 5.14**

MEL: So, nowadays Glories, Diagonal Mar, there is also international space, international business places and nowadays they are asking for more English.

Semi-structured interview, recruiter Melanie, Spencer Junior, 25/10/2017

Sectors such as private education are also receiving students whose parents belong to the multinational workforce in Barcelona (Sunyol, 2019). Therefore, the English requirement is becoming more important for the private Education sector. Recruitment agency Williams has opened a small division that manages various job positions in private education. According to recruiter Nuria, teachers who specialize in teaching

curriculum in English and international reception specialists, who welcome international students to schools, are in demand.

This section provides support for the claims that the requirement for English skills in the Barcelona labour market is linked with new kinds of jobs that emerge as a result of company strategies to relocate to Barcelona. These companies create offices with global operations for which they also hire globally, which raises the general demand for English skills in Barcelona. However, this type of business does not necessarily solve the unemployment problem, as relatively few Spanish candidates are considered eligible to hire.

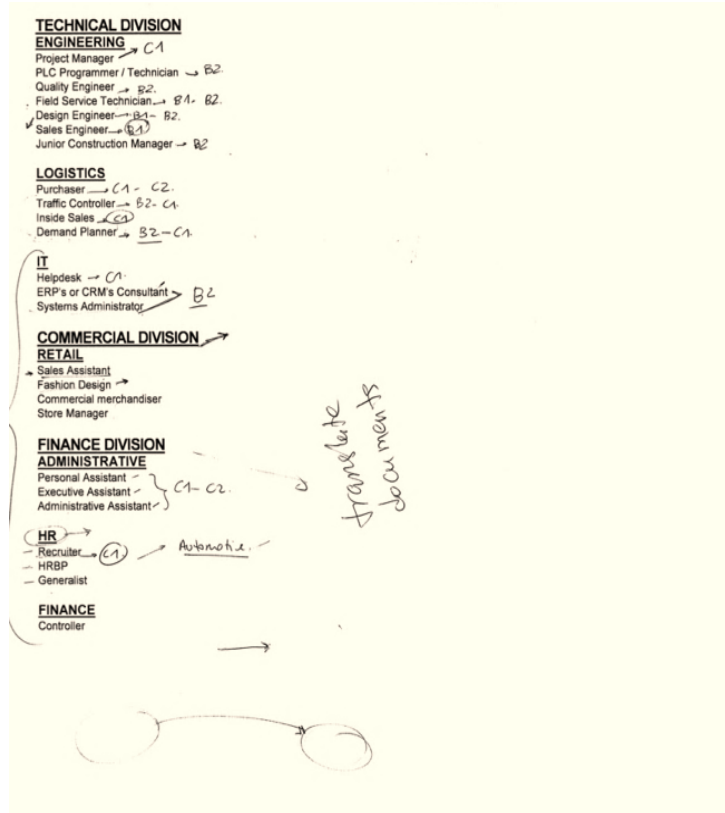
### **5.3 English skills: The “nice to have” and the “indispensable skill”**

This section looks into the meaning of the English skills requirement for selection from the recruiters’ perspective. English is required for most job postings that are published on webpages of the recruitment agencies. However, as stated in the job announcements, the requirement does not reflect any nuances in the level of competence that is actually needed on the job. The way recruiters talk about the requirement in relation to its job functions, as well as the way they carry out screening and interviews, reveals that English skills have an exchange value in recruitment but they do not always have the corresponding use value. In other words, the English skills requirement does not match the job function. The theoretical definitions for “use value” and “exchange value” (Urciuoli, 2008) are adopted in this section to explain how the two types of English skills are valued in the observed recruitment practices.

When I began fieldwork at Spencer in November 2017, a significant number of the job announcements that appeared on the Spencer webpage included an English requirement. The job announcements at the two departments, Spencer Junior and Spencer Senior, are always organized by economic sector, and the recruiters usually specialize in each of them. Out of a total of 155 job announcements published Spencer Senior’s webpage, 114 included the requirement for English. 153 of these jobs offered a permanent contract, while only two were temporary positions. Out of the 24 jobs published at Spencer Junior, 19 offered a permanent contract and five offered a temporary contract. 16 jobs had an English requirement, out of which three job announcements mentioned other languages in addition to English; two job

announcements required French; and six jobs had no explicit requirement for English. A high level of English was required for 12 the jobs, and this requirement was formulated in the following ways: “high level of English is essential”; “it is necessary to have a high level of English”; and “high level of English is indispensable” (original: *imprescindible un nivel alto de inglés; es necesario aportar un nivel de inglés alto; indispensable un nivel alto de inglés*). The three job posts in the production and engineering sectors required a medium English level, articulated as: “medium English level (B1-B2)”; and “good level of English is valued” (original: *inglés medio (b1-b2); valorable buen nivel de inglés*). Only one job announcement, where a high level of English was required, had an explicit reference to the advanced level within the European reference framework. In practice, “high level of English” can mean different things to clients, recruiters, and to candidates themselves. The requirement can also refer to different linguistic competencies in English.

**Image 5.4**  
English Skills and Job Titles



Spencer Junior department document, 09/05/2017

**Table 5.5**  
Job Announcements With English Skills

Sector	Number of Jobs	Number of Jobs Requiring English
Automotive	14	13
Construction	4	2
Business, Consulting and Management	4	1
Energy and Mining	1	1
Pharmaceutical	8	7
Engineering	18	16
Real State	2	1
Logistics and Suppliers	9	2
Production and Manufacturing	12	10
Legal Practice	7	6
Publicity, Public Relations and Mass Communication	4	2
Retail and Consumer Goods	23	17
Health and Medical Services	3	2
Recruitment of personnel	1	1
Technology and Internet	40	28
Telecommunications	1	1
Travel, Catering, Leisure and Tourism	4	4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>114</b>

Job announcements collected from the Spencer website, 01/11/2017

Paula from Spencer Junior (Image 5.4) drew an approximation of the English skills level needed for the job titles she worked with, in line with her experience. However, when recruiters formulate the requirement, they tend to think in terms of different job functions, as well as in terms of what the clients want. As seen in Image 5.4, recruiters most often assign the jobs a B2 or C1 level of English skills. These two levels refer to very different job functions and have different meanings for recruiters.

During the period of my research, IT Power was managing a selection process for the airline company “Fly Cosy”. Typically, recruiters receive a job description from the client company, they discuss the job with their client, and then they post a job announcement on their webpage. In the job description for Agile and Scrum Master, as seen in Image 5.6, there is an explicit statement that there is no requirement for any language. However, in the job announcement, published on the webpage (Image 5.7), a high level of English is among the main requirements.

## Image 5.6 Job Description

1.	Funcions a realitzar: Duties: - Guide the team on how to use Agile/Scrum practices - Promote self-organization of the Scrum Team - Act as team coach - Removes impediments or blockers - Build a trusting and safe environment where problems can be raised without fear of blame, retribution, or being judged, with an emphasis of healing and problem solving - Facilitates getting work done without coercion - Facilitates discussion, decision making, and conflict resolution - Assists with internal and external communication, improving transparency - Supports the Product Owner, especially in grooming and maintaining the product backlog - Provides all support to the team using a servant leadership style whenever possible, and leading by example
2.	Descripció del projecte: Indefinido
3.	Data prevista d'incorporació: Inmediata
4.	Duració del projecte: Indefinido
5.	Sou: 35.000-40.000
6.	Tipus de contracte: obra i servei / indefinit: Indefinido
7.	Horari laboral: Entrada semiflexible 8:00-9:00
8.	Formació:
9.	Idiomes: No es requerido
10.	Requisits (CAD 3D/IT SW):
11.	Desitjat (no descarta)
12.	Anys experiència mínima: 2 años de experiencia También se puede valorar alguien que tenga experiencia en desarrollo que haya trabajado en Agile y quiera dar el paso a este cambio de rol
13.	Ubicación: El Prat de Llobregat

## Translation of Image 5.6

1.	<i>Tasks to carry out:</i>
2.	<i>Project description: Undefined</i>
3.	<i>Expected start date: Immediate.</i>
4.	<i>Project duration: Undefined.</i>
5.	<i>Salary: 35000 - 40000</i>
6.	<i>Contract type: Work and service / Undefined.</i>
7.	<i>Working hours: Semiflexible starting time: 8:00 - 9:00</i>
8.	<i>Training:</i>
9.	<i>Languages: Not required.</i>
10.	<i>Requirements: (CAD 3D/IT SW)</i>
11.	<i>Advisable: Does not rule out.</i>
12.	<i>Minimum years of experience: 2 years of experience. It will also be valued having experience in development, having worked with Agile and willingness to switch to this role.</i>
13.	<i>Location: El Prat de Llobregat.</i>

## Image 5.7 Job Announcement

**¿Qué haré? Estas serán tus funciones principales:**

- Te encargarás de la gestión del uso de metodología ágil/Scrum
- Serás el coach del equipo
- Facilitarás la consecución de objetivos creando un equipo sólido
- Serás el responsable de facilitar el diálogo, la toma de decisiones y resolución de problemas

**Beneficios que tendrás en tu lugar de trabajo:**

- Horario de 8h/día
- Contrato indefinido
- Trabajo con equipos de alto rendimiento

**Requisitos**

- Nivel alto de inglés
- Valorable experiencia en equipos de desarrollo web (como developer o como scrum master)

### Translation of Image 5.7

***What will I do? These are going to be the following tasks:***

*You will manage the use of Scrum/Agile methodology*  
*You will be the team coach*  
*You will facilitate the reaching of objectives by means of creating a solid team*  
*You will be responsible for facilitation dialogue, decision-making and problem-solving*

***Benefits you will have in your job:***

*8h workday*  
*Permanent contract*  
*Highly productive teams*

***Requirements:***

*High level of English*  
*Valued experience in web development teams (as a developer or a Scrum Master)*

IT Power, 03/04/2019

Recruiter Elena explains that the requirement is an additional bonus, stating that candidates should have it, but that it is not needed to carry out the job:

### **Extract 5.15**

ELE: Por qué lo hacen, porque el inglés es un punto extra, es decir, si tengo muchos perfiles iguales, pero uno tiene inglés, me quedo con el de inglés, por si lo necesito. O sea, el inglés es un nice to have.

### **Translation of Extract 5.15**

ELE: *Why do they do it, because English is an extra point, that is to say, if I have a lot of similar profiles, I chose the one with English in case I need it. I mean, English is a nice to have.*

Short conversation, recruiter Elena, IT Power, 03/04/2019

In the given extract, Elena refers to her own recruitment practice, as well as to the candidate's wish to have employees with English proficiency. The discrepancy between the two stated "requirements" arises during the conversation with clients, which in turn affects how the recruiter organizes selection. The new, adjusted requirement then appears in the job offers that get published online, even though it was not among the initial requisites provided by the client.

Recruiter Albert, IT Power who hires people for the multinational company, Smart Things, explains that even if the requirement is not mentioned in the job description tasks, it is implicit that the client is expecting candidates with a minimum of B2:

### **Extract 5.16**

ALB: Si no pone nada del inglés es que se da por hecho que lo tienes que más o menos defenderte por eso decía antes de un B2 que es lo que siempre estamos buscando.

### **Translation of Extract 5.16**

ALB: *If nothing is written about English, it is that it will be taken for granted that you more or less have to be able to get by (in English), that is why I told you B2 before, which is what we are always looking for.*

Semi-structured interview, Albert, IT Power, 24/04/2019

Recruiter Paula from Spencer Junior shares her experience on how the process of negotiation with clients develops. According to her, English is very important to clients. When they give a job order to a recruiter, they always state that the highest level possible is needed for the position:

### Extract 5.17

- PAU: Yo siempre cuando me siento con ellos (mis clientes) les pregunto xxx
- RES: =uhuh sobre idiomas\
- PAU: exa:cto\ algún/ idioma\. O cuando por ejemplo veo/ en la job description/ requisitos... e: que: el candidato tiene que tener un nivel advanced de inglés\ por ejemplo\. Entonces yo pregunto (.) vale (.) para qué? Para qué va utilizar el inglés no/ porque por ejemplo esta chica me decía/ (.) le digo, idiomas/ es necesario/? Sí, sí, sí, muy necesario/, un nivel muy alto de inglés/ digo (.) para qué lo va a utilizar dice (.) bueno (.) a veces... va a hablar con los clientes. A ver (.) si lo va a utilizar a veces/ (.) no necesitas que hable (.) un advanced o un proficiency (...) una persona que se defienda, que sea capaz (.) de: e coger el teléfono... y entente- y mandar un email\ no/ en inglés/ porque si no\ a lo mejor estamos descartando a candidatos (...) Ella primero me pidió el inglés pero esto/ lo hacen mu:chos clientes eh/ (.) te piden un nivel de inglés muy alto/ (.) y cuando tú empiezas a preguntar (.) por qué tan alto/ (.) entonces es cuando ves que (.) no hace falta que sea (.) tan/ tan/ alto\.

### Translation of Extract 5.17

- PAU: *When I sit down with them (my clients) I always ask them xxx*
- RES: *=uhuh about languages\*
- PAU: *exa:ctly\ any/ language\. Or when I see/ in a short job description/ among the requirements... er: tha:t a candidate needs to have an advanced level of English\, for example\. Then I ask (.) ok, (.) for what? What are they going to use English for right/ because for example this girl was telling/ me (.) and I tell her, languages/ are necessary/? Yes, yes, yes, language is very necessary/, a high level of English/ I say (.) what are they going to use it for says (.) well (.) ok (.) sometimes... to speak with clients. Let's see (.) if the person is only going to use it to occasionally/ (.) you do not need an advanced or a proficiency level (...) a person who can get by, who is able (.) to: answer the phone... and under- send an email\ right/ in English/ because if not\ maybe we are excluding candidates eh/ (.) they ask for a very high level of English (.) and when you start asking (.) why such a high/ level (.) it's when you see that (.) they do not need that it'd be (.) such/ such/ a high level\.*

Post-interview conversation, recruiter Paula, Spencer Junior, 25/10/2017

Recruiter Paula interprets the English skills requirement in terms of job functions. When she sees that the client does not have a reason to require an advanced English skills level, she tries to negotiate by saying that she cannot screen out otherwise valid candidates if they are not going to use English on the job. In her case, she resists the client's requirement for the advanced skills level, which, according to Paula, is not justified. This particular recruiter's approach does not mean that she is seeking justice, but rather it is a pragmatic approach that reflects her role as a recruiter. Paula knows



that finding a candidate with advanced English skills is going to be difficult and time-consuming. By lowering the requirement, she will manage to deliver the candidate, and the recruitment agency will profit from it. Nevertheless, it can be argued that a minimum of B2 is still not justified for many positions in terms of the relevant job. At the interview, such requirement is explained to the candidate in the following way:

### Extract 5.18

PAU: Te preguntaba un poquito el tema de::, del inglés, porque sí que es verdad que no lo vas a utilizar diariamente en tu día a día, porque sobre todo el ámbito de actuación es a nivel nacional, pero puede ser que con algún artista que venga de fuera tengas que utilizarlo, o que algún, alguna exposición para coordinar algún equipo lo tengas también que utilizar, mejor ellos prefieren que la persona lo haya utilizado ya y que lo domine que no alguien que no, que no sea capaz de tener una conversación en inglés

CAN: sí

PAU: ya te digo que no se necesita en el día a día cien por cien...

### Translation of Extract 5.18

PAU: *I also asked you a little bit about the issue of English, because it is true that you are not going to use it daily in your day-to-day life, because above all the field of operation is on a national level, but it may be that with an artist coming from abroad you may have to use it, or that some, some exhibition to coordinate some team you may also have to use it, they prefer that the person has already used it and knows it rather than someone who is not capable of having a conversation in English.*

CAN: *Yes*

PAU: *I am telling you, you don't need it day-to-day one hundred per cent...*

Interview observation, recruiter Paula, Spencer Junior, 25/10/2017

At the interview where the requirement for English skills cannot be justified by the job function associated with this skill, Paula invokes expressions that denote the possibility of having to use English, while simultaneously reassuring the candidate that he qualifies for the given job. Day-to-day use of English skills is the key factor recruiters use to determine which positions actually require English on the job.

Recruiter Albert, from IT Power, draws a distinction between the English skills requirement that has a use value and the requirement that only has an exchange value. For Albert, a “wish” refers to the English skills candidates are not going to use daily. A “must” means that candidates will use English on their job daily, or that they will have to travel or work with an international team. Recruiters use these terms in order to

define what kinds of English skills they have to look for, even though the resulting job announcements call for a high or even advanced level of English.

### Extract 5.19

- ALB: Depende mucho de la posición. Hay posiciones que son muy cerradas dentro de un entorno muy local, y solo hablan con gente de su oficina, si la oficina está ubicada en España o en Catalunya, hablarán español o catalán en el 99 % del tiempo, el inglés es, es mandatory en todos los casos pero el nivel B2, para que la, porque la documentación todo va en inglés. \*\*Smart Things es una empresa corporate worldwide y el el idioma vehicular de todas las comunicaciones oficiales es el inglés. Entonces la persona, si le hago un mail en inglés, lo tiene que entender. Pero su día a día será en español o será en catalán. Vale, hay otras posiciones que están expuestas a otros departamentos de \*\*Smart Things, que están en otros países
- RES: en Asia
- ALB: en Asia, en Estados Unidos, donde sea en el mundo, y allí, el inglés pasa a ser una main skill, y no un wish vale
- RES: cómo? Main skill
- ALB: main skill o wish. Wish o must. Hay hay hay posiciones donde el inglés es un must, y hay posiciones que es un wish. Vale.
- RES: so wish is as minimum B2.
- ALB: B2 sí, es un minimum

### Translation of Extract 5.19

- ALB: *It depends a lot on the position. There are positions that are very closed within a very local environment, and they only talk to people in their office, if the office is located in Spain or Catalonia, they will speak Spanish or Catalan 99% of the time, English is, it is mandatory in all cases but B2 level, so why? because the documentation is all in English. \*\*Smart Things is a corporate worldwide company and the vehicular language of all official communications is English. So the person, if I send him an email in English, he has to understand it. But their day-to-day work will be in Spanish or Catalan. Ok, there are other positions that are exposed to other \*\*Smart Things departments, which are in other countries.*
- RES: *in Asia*
- ALB: *in Asia, in the United States, wherever in the world, and there, English becomes a main skill, and not a "wish", OK*
- RES: *how? Main skill*
- ALB: *main skill or wish. Wish or must. There are positions where English is a must, and there are positions where it is a wish. OK.*
- RES: *so wish is as minimum B2.*
- ALB: *B2 yes, it is a minimum.*

Semi-structured interview, recruiter Albert, IT Power, 24/04/2019

Recruiter Albert is on retainer for a renowned multinational company, "Smart Things", that is currently working with an innovative technology. Because Albert understands that in this company most employees' first language is Spanish or Catalan,

he keeps in mind that English skills are a wish, and he does not discard candidates as long as they can communicate well in English and their English skills can stand up to an interview with the Smart Things manager. In his mind, this translates as a B2 level. Albert's colleague, who is also on retainer for "Smart Things", considers the same requirement an advanced level. In the job announcement, it is presented as "fluent spoken and written English for an engineer in Electronics".

Multinational companies are the ones creating the highest demand for English skills. According to Paula from Spencer, multinationals are afraid to hire people without English skills. Typically, multinationals require an advanced level of all workers and a near-native level of English for positions where English skills are actually essential to carrying out job functions. In practice, few people actually need an advanced or even B2 level of English in order to excel in their jobs, to say nothing of English fluency, which is what recruiters mean when they refer to these levels<sup>2</sup>. However, all workers are selected on the basis of this requirement, which does not have a corresponding use function. Whether a candidate will qualify for a job or not, depends on how the recruiter who manages the job selection process treats English skills.

Recruiter Claudia, who specializes in the pharmaceutical sector, explains that multinational companies require a high level of English because of internal company communications. She compares the advanced level of English required for such tasks with the near-native level that is required for positions such as International Project Manager. English skills are an absolute must for such jobs because they are considered strategic, and the employees are supposed to manage several national territories. A candidate applying for a job through Spencer would not qualify for the position of International Project Manager because she would need a near-native level of English. Her English would be good enough to work at a multinational company as a project manager but not good enough for an international role, according to Claudia.

### **Extract 5.20**

CLA: Si tú entras en una multinacional casi siempre te van a pedir inglés. Porque muchas veces el contacto interno ya es con una persona que está deslocalizado. Entonces, el contacto interno tiene que ser en inglés. En este caso el inglés se necesita un nivel alto pero con el suyo

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<sup>2</sup> In the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, the term "fluency" appears in the description for both, B2 and C1 language skills levels (Council of Europe, 2020).

bastaría. Vale. No se necesita un nivel muy muy superior para poder hablar internamente con otros países en lo que es personal de la propia compañía. ¿Vale? Entonces, normalmente nos piden un nivel alto de inglés para multinacional. Pero luego estaríamos hablando ya de roles en farma sobre todo en perfiles comerciales y en perfiles de marketing. Hay muchos roles que son internacionales. Que igual el marketing se lleva para varios territorios. ¿Vale? Estos perfiles sí que tienen que hablar muy bien inglés y aparte conocer, haber trabajado en otros territorios. (...) Pero son más posiciones estratégicas. (...) Quizás no podría ir a una posición, como ahora, ahora por ejemplo tengo una posición que es International Product Manager. Entonces ella no encajaría, primero tendría que evaluar más su nivel de inglés, pero en principio e::, quizás necesitaría un plus más. El click ese de que sea casi-casi nativo. ¿Vale?

### Translation of Extract 5.20

CLA: *If you enter a multinational, almost always they will ask you for English. Because on many occasions the internal contact is with the person that is located elsewhere. So, the internal contact has to be in English. In this case, a high level of English is needed but her level would be enough. Ok. Not a very-very superior level is needed in order to be able to talk internally with other countries with the staff of the same company. Ok? So, normally they ask for a high level of English for a multinational. But then we would be talking about pharma roles, especially commercial profiles in marketing. There are a lot of roles that are international. Maybe marketing is managed for different regions. Ok? These profiles yes, they have to speak very good English, and moreover to know, to have worked in other territories. (...) But these are more strategic positions. (...) Perhaps she would not be able to get this position, now for example I have the positions of an International Project Manager. So, she would not qualify, first I would need to evaluate her English more, but in principle, e::, perhaps she needs a plus more. This click that she is almost-almost native. Ok?*

Post-interview conversation, recruiter Claudia, Spencer Senior, 10/10/2018

Recruiter Hugo from Spencer Senior specializes in Law. He states that all big law firms require a minimum of advanced English, and it is still sometimes insufficient for the work lawyers have to undertake, as they need to produce legal documents in both English and Spanish. He admits that even though some lawyers can pass the English skills tests administered by the law firms when applying for jobs, they struggle with the language demands in practice. In this case, English skills are essential to the lawyers' jobs.

### Extract 5.21

RES: Para este/ (.) puesto/ qué nivel solicitaron...  
HUG: vale (.) para este puesto necesitaba un inglés/ (.) un advanced\. O sea (.) debe saber inglés\  
Porque/ porque\ (.) todos los despachos en el día de hoy piden inglés, todos, todos, todos.  
RES: y qué nivel piden?

HUG: advanced\ . Advanced mínimo (.) e- es decir (.) depende del tipo de despacho. Te voy a explicar\ venga. (...) Entonces todos los que están aquí/ digamos/, que son los importantes/, inglés perfecto\

RES: por qué?

HUG: =porque te lo explico\ . Todos estos despachos (.) vale/ hacen (.) pruebas de nivel (.) vale/ para entrar. Yo cuando entré en mi despacho/ yo era abogado\ (.) hace un mes. Para entrar a mi despacho tuve que hacer redacción... jurídica en inglés/, tuve que hacer... e:: entrevista telefónica en inglés/, test de inglés tipo gramática:, bullet po:ints, use of English (.) sabes/ todo esto. Haces las pruebas. (...) Los propios despachos/ te lo hacen. Pero qué pasa que tú quizás pasas los tests (.) porque (.) todo el mundo conoce como son las pruebas de los despachos. Sabes yo tengo un amigo/ ha entrado a un **\*\*Big Law**/, entonces ya sé que van a preguntar en **\*\*Big Law**/ en la prueba de inglés. Vale muy bien. Entonces quizás/ y- yo paso la prueba y- y estoy dentro porque he h:echo muy bien la prueba. (.) Pero como no sepas inglés perfecto, cuando estás dentro y empiezas a trabajar, no vas a poder a trabajar. Por ejemplo (.) yo estaba en un despacho de los grandes, y el ochenta por ciento de mi trabajo era en inglés. Y aun así/ me costa:ba y tenía que estudiar porque era inglés jurídico\ y yo no estaba acostumbrado a esto.

### Translation of Extract 5.21

RES: *for this / (.) position/ which level was asked for...*

HUG: *ok. (.) For this post I needed Advanced/ (.) English\ . Well, (.) one has to know English\ . Because/ because\ (.) all the law firms today ask for English, all, all, all of them.*

RES: *and which level do they ask for?*

HUG: *advanced\ . Advanced minimum. (.) e- That is to say, (.) it depends on the law firm. I'm going to explain it to you\ , come on. (...) So all the ones that are here/, that is to say/, the ones that are important/, perfect English\*

RES: *why?*

HUG: *=because I will explain\ . All these law firms (.) ok/ they do (.) level tests (.) okay, to enter. Me, when I entered my law firm/, I was a lawyer\ (.) one month ago. To enter my law firm I had to do legal editing... in English/, I had to do... e:: telephone interviews in English/, test type grammar bullet po:ints, use of English. (.) You know/ all of this. You do the testes. (...) The law firms themselves/ they test you. But what happens is that perhaps you pass the test, because (.) because (.) everybody knows what the tests in law firms are like. You know I have a friend who entered **\*\*Big Law**/, then I already know what they are going to ask in **\*\*Big Law**/ in an English test. Ok very well. So maybe/ I- I pass the test an- and I'm in because I di:d the test very well. (.) But since you don't know English perfectly, when you are in and you start working you are not going to be able to work. For example, (.) I was in a law firm, one of the big ones, and eighty percent of my work was in English. And even like that/ it was h:ard for me and I had to study because it was legal\ English and I wasn't used to that.*

Post-interview conversation, recruiter Hugo, Spencer Senior, 09/10/2018

This section has covered how the English skills requirement has two distinct meanings for recruiters in line with the experiences they obtain through communication with clients and through their understanding of the different job functions associated with the professional profiles they specialize in. The requirement for English skills is

often inflated. If no English is required for a job, the job announcement often states that a high level of English is needed, and if English skills are essential to the job, a near-native competence is demanded of candidates. Clients request English for its perceived economic value, even though they cannot justify requiring it in terms of its use function. Because of this mindset, recruiters know implicitly that English skills need to be included in the job announcement, even when there is no such requirement in the job description. As a result, candidates are selected on the basis of English skill level they do not need in order to perform their jobs. While recruiters do adjust the requested level of English to better match the reality of the available workforce and the requirements of their clients, they nevertheless shape the recruitment process by creating a greater demand for English skills. In the process, they also set a precedent regarding the type of candidate profile that ends up working for these companies. The observable skills gap, analysed in the Section 5.1, is also the consequence of the recruiters' perception that they cannot find candidates with the skill levels their clients want. An ideal candidate for the client is always the one with English skills, and recruiters are in the business to please their clients.

#### **5.4 The price of English**

In the previous section, a distinction was drawn between the two types of value assigned to the English skills requirement in selection processes. English skills are defined as an asset, a useful skill, a "wish" for firms, or as an essential skill that is required for a smaller number of jobs. In recruitment, all of these connotations translate into an English requirement that regulates access to jobs.

Choosing the best candidate for a job is not only about the selection of a set of valuable skills, also called a "bundle of skills" (Urciuoli, 2008), but also about what companies can afford or wish to pay in terms of salary. While English skills are believed to be economically valuable for companies, individuals also expect monetary benefits for this skill if they are hired. This section investigates how recruiters' practices contribute to the construction and reproduction of the economic value of English skills for both job-seekers and recruiters. It also looks into the rationale that determines how English skills are factored into a workers' salary and the effect of this additional cost on companies' decisions to hire staff.

Grin et al. (2010) argues that companies always want to hire the best candidate profile for the optimal price. This adds complexity to recruitment process, because skills, definition of job tasks for a certain profile, and salaries are a subject to change as companies explore their options for candidates. As a result, recruiters often face a change in the selection criteria, or they may see some requirements dropped by the client, as companies weigh up all the factors to match their expectations of worker skills with the labour market reality (Grin et al., 2010).

When a recruitment agency is hired to look for a candidate, it is not always the case that the company has a ready-made job description and a fixed price in mind. As explained by the Sales representative Maribel at IT Power, companies often come to recruiters with projects. The number of job posts and their description are designed together with the recruiters, and the salaries are also determined in coordination with them.

Recruitment agencies gather a lot of information about the labour market. They know what kinds of job profiles were hired at which price, and they have their own salary guides that can be consulted by companies. Thus, they are in control of what competitive salary has to be offered in order to attract a pool of available candidates. The price of skills in the labour market depends on the demand for them and on how many available candidates there are. If there are fewer profiles of candidates with these valuable skills, they will cost companies more (Granovetter, 1995). As recruiters increase the demand for English skills by inflating the English skills requirement, in theory they are also creating the conditions of scarcity for this skill. It is within their power to shape the price for English skills through their recruitment practices. In this way, language skills appear to acquire their own price that is tied to labour market. Candidate profiles with these skills can opt for higher salaries.

### **Extract 5.22**

MAR: Normalmente es cuando ya empiezan hacer el proyecto, de que xxx el Shared Service, ya trabajan con consultores como \*\*Consulting Services, ya allí hay expertos explican, vale pues para un Account xxx ya están pagando 24 mil, si tiene alemán, 28 mil, entonces ya son estudios de mercado, nosotros por ejemplo, también nos dedicamos a eso. Hacemos un estudio de mercado y tenemos la guía salarial. Entonces ellos lo fijan al inicio y cuando hablábamos de porque vinieran a Barcelona y miraban costes también va relacionado con esto.

### Translation of Extract 5.22

MAR: *Normally it is when they start to do the project, that xxx the Shared Service, they already work with consultants like \*\*Consulting Services, there are already experts there, they explain, well, for an Account xxx they are already paying 24 thousand, if you have German, 28 thousand, then they are already market studies, we for example, we are also dedicated to that. We do a market study and we have the salary guide. So they set it at the beginning and when we talked about why they came to Barcelona and looked at costs, it is also related to this.*

Post-interview conversation, recruiter Marc, Spencer Senior, 10/10/2018

However, salaries for new job posts are not just defined by the labour market price, but they are also regulated by companies' collective agreements. As discussed in the Context chapter of this thesis, multinational companies can typically offer better salaries to their workers because of better collective bargaining. Companies that offer salaries that are higher than the market price do so in hopes of securing candidates with better skills. Edgar, the Manager for the recruiters' division at IT Power, explains that the company "Smart Things" pays better salaries to its workers. However, in exchange it also wants all the employees to have English skills.

### Extract 5.23

EDG: *Porque además en las posiciones, y si vas a nuestra web tal, si tú te miras las posiciones de \*\*Smart Things, que se requieren en todas inglés, no es solo por eso. Vale, no es solo por eso. Pero es un motivo, es decir, se requiere inglés en todas. Como se requiere inglés en todas, están mas altas. Tú miras los ingenieros mecánicos, tú mírate, puedes mirar en nuestra web e, tú tienes ingenieros mecánicos de, o los proyectistas mecánicos que incorporamos en, en yo qué sé, en \*\*Project Works, en \*\*Industrial, en donde sea, y te miras las posiciones para \*\*Smart Things. Normalmente están en 30 las de \*\*Smart Things. Las otras están en 26, 27, no es solo por el inglés, pero es un motivo. Que seguramente hace subir, no hará subir de 26 a 30, pero sí que hará subir de 26 a 27,5. Por qué, porque \*\*Smart Things dice, "yo los quiero a todos con inglés". Y nosotros decimos, "vale, perfecto". Me tendrás que pagar un euro más a la hora. Porque el mercado claro, porque el mercado es más caro.*

### Translation of Extract 5.23

EDG: *Because also in the positions, and if you go to our website if you look at the positions of \*\*Smart Things, all of them require English, it's not just because of that. Okay it's not just because of that. But it is a reason, I mean English is required in all of them. Since English is required in all of them, they are higher. You look at the mechanical engineers, you look for yourself, you can look at our website and, you have mechanical engineers or mechanical designers that we incorporate in I don't know, in \*\*Project Works, in \*\*Industrial, wherever,*



*and you look at the positions for \*\*Smart Things. Normally \*\*Smart Things is at 30. at The other (companies) are at 26, 27, it's not just because of English, but it's a reason. It definitely makes it go up, it's not going to increase from 26 to 30, but it's going to increase from 26 to 27.5. Because, because \*\*Smart Things says, "I want them all with English". And we say, "OK, perfect". You'll have to pay me an extra euro an hour. Because the market of course, because the market is more expensive.*

Semi-structured interview, Edgar, IT Power Manager, 10/04/2019

It is difficult to assess whether better salaries are really offered for the workers' English skills or if larger companies are simply able to offer better conditions because they make more business, allowing them to demand the skills as a bonus. However, what recruitment agencies state is that higher salaries are, at least in part, offered in exchange for English skills. Recruitment agencies also get more profit from the companies for the additional skills requirements.

Jobs announcements typically include a salary range that is adjusted to candidate's skills and previous salary conditions. Edgar from IT Power states that his company wants to introduce clear definitions of skills that fall within the salary range for job positions. However, it is implicit that candidates who have English skills already receive better offers.

#### **Extract 5.24**

EDG: Después de analizar la, el salario real, el salario de mercado, y nosotros definir unas bandas para nuestra empresa, es decir, vale viendo lo que cobramos, viendo lo que cobra el mercado, pues un Programador Java, vamos a darle una franja salarial entre 30 y 35. Vale, entonces aquí tenemos que traducir, vale, de qué va a depender. Y tendremos que entrar a valorar si será la formación, la seniority, los idiomas, qué será lo que hará que esa categoría profesional esté más arriba o más abajo. Esta va a ser una fase tres de este proyecto que está llevando \*\*Peter con \*\*Paula... para poder hacer, hacer esto. Cómo lo hacemos ahora, cómo lo hacemos ahora. Pues dentro de esta franja más o menos que nosotros conocemos, evidentemente, si una persona, e:, si un proyectista mecánico e:, tiene la carrera, de, de ingeniería mecánica, la franja salarial es más alta. Si habla inglés, la franja salarial va a ser más alta. (...) Implícitamente se hace porque el candidato te pide más. Es decir, al final ya no es tanto que lo determines tú, cuando lo tengamos definido, con esta fase tres, lo podremos hacer, pero ahora mismo el propio candidato normalmente te pide más. O sea, lo normal en general si tú coges todos los, si tú coges 100 candidatos que son, si han trabajado en las mismas empresas, haciendo las mismas tareas y tienen la misma formación, y hay 50 con inglés y 50 sin inglés, y los entrevistas a todos, los que tienen inglés te van a pedir más. (...) ahora me he ido a hacer 100 entrevistas, pero si hago ocho entrevistas, el que hable inglés, va a pedir más. ¡Ojo! Va a pedir no mucho más, entre mil y dos mil euros más.

## Translation of Extract 5.24

EDG: *After we have analysed the real salary and the market salary, and we define some ranges for our company, and we say okay, seeing what we charge, seeing what the market charges, a Java Programmer, we are going to give him a salary range between 30 and 35. Ok, then here we are going to define what it is going to depend on. And we have to try to assess whether it will be the training, the seniority, the languages, what it will be, what will make that professional category lower. This is going to be phase three that \*\*Peter is carrying out with \*\*Paula... in order to be able to do this. How do we do them now. How we do them now. Well, within the range that we know, obviously if a person, e.; if a mechanical designer e.; has a degree in mechanical engineering, the salary range is higher, if he speaks English, the salary range will be higher. (...) Implicitly it is done because the candidate asks for more. In other words, in the end it's not so much that you define it, when we have it defined, with this phase three, we can do it, but right now the candidate himself normally asks you for more. In other words, in general, if you take all of them, if you take 100 candidates who are, if they have worked in the same companies doing the same tasks and have the same training, and there are 50 with English and 50 without English, and you interview them all, the ones who have English will ask you for more. (...) now I've gone to do 100 interviews, but if I do eight interviews, the one who speaks English will ask for more. Beware! But not much more, between 1,000 and 2,000 euro more.*

Semi-structured interview, Edgar, IT Power Manager, 10/04/2019

Thus, according to Edgar, English skills can make a difference of one or two thousand euro within the salary range advertised in the job announcement. Interestingly, the candidates are the ones who claim an economic bonus for English skills in the interviews. Edgar also points out that English skills may appear in job announcements as either a minimum requirement or a valued skill. If English skills are a minimum requirement, the starting salary range will be approximately two thousand higher than if it is not. If English is not listed as a mandatory skill, a bonus will be added in the case that a candidate has it. In practice, almost all jobs advertised at recruitment agencies have English skills as a minimum requirement, which means that candidates can no longer request a higher salary than what is posted, as the skills are already included. In the long run, as more people gain the English skills knowledge, the small profit people seemingly gain for English skills will disappear (Ricento, 2015). Thus, the practice of including English skills in the minimum requirements can be considered as a way to readjust the labour market by increasing the amount of profiles that have the English skills and eliminating the bonus that these profiles currently gain. The discourses about the economic value and the English skills gap reproduced by recruitment agencies are favourable for companies, as they will eventually have more workers with English skills available at a cheaper price.

Marc, at Spencer Senior, confirms that candidates at Spencer are offered a bit more for their language skills.

### Extract 5.25

MAR: Importa el inglés y alemán, como en el caso de mañana. Por ejemplo, si ponemos la franja de 30 mil, vale, por ejemplo. Si no tiene inglés, solo tiene español, que quiero decir, persona solo puede trabajar para España, 28. Como español e inglés, que en principio con el inglés podrías trabajar para todo, pero bueno después tal, 30. Y después te diría, e, para poner creciendo. El siguiente sería francés e italiano, 31, y los más complicados es el alemán, 32, por ejemplo. Y lo hacen así en Shared Service. Pagar un poco más por aportar los idiomas.

### Translation of Extract 5.25

MAR: *What matters is English and German, like in tomorrow's case. For example, if we put the salary range of 30k, okay, for example. If he does not have English, he only has Spanish, what I want to say, the person can only work in Spain, 28. If Spanish and English, in principle with English you can work in everything, but okay then, 30. And then I would tell you, e, to raise it incrementally. The next would be French and Italian, 31, and the most complicated is German, 32 for example. And they do it this way, in shared service. To pay a bit more for having languages.*

Post-interview conversation, recruiter Marc, Spencer Senior, 10/10/2018

Extract 5.25 refers to how candidates are offered a bit more in salary for additional language skills for the jobs in shared service centres. The problem with such logic is that a candidate who does not have these skills cannot apply for these positions. Acquisition of multiple language skills may add to candidate's employability; however, it is not clear if the benefit is worth the investment.

The theoretical argument that English skills add to workers' salary does not always hold true in recruitment contexts, because besides the wish to hire candidates with English skills, companies also want to cut costs.

### Extract 5.26

RES: Entonces en tema salarial lo que has explicado es que \*\*Smart Things también como todo el mundo quiere pagar menos, esto significa que, bueno yo creo que \*\*Smart Things es una empresa que tendría que pagar bien ¿no? en relación con otro mercado, o es solo  
ALB: para los employees de \*\*Smart Things quizá sí. Para lo que son consultorías externas, outsourcing services, no es mala, pero es, em, intenta bajar los precios siempre. Lo que puede pasar es que sacrifiquemos el inglés para bajar el salario. Pero no solo en el inglés. Puede ser que el candidato mejor \*\*Smart Things no quiera pagarlo ¿me explico? entonces

no lo presentamos. Y así se queda en el camino. O sea, a mí cuando me dan el perfil, me dicen, yo quiero estas skills, estas skills, skills por este precio.

### Translation of Extract 5.26

*RES: So in terms of wages what you have explained is that \*\*Smart Things also, like everybody else, wants to pay less, this means that, well I think that \*\*Smart Things is a company that should pay well, no? In relation to another market, or is it just*

*ALB: for \*\*Smart Things employees maybe yes. For external consultancies, outsourcing services, it's not bad, but it tries to always lower the prices. What can happen is that we sacrifice English to lower the salary. But not only English. It could be that \*\*Smart Things does not want to pay for a better candidate. Am I making sense? Then we don't present him. And that's how one falls by the wayside. So when they give me the profile, they say I want these skills, these skills, skills for this price.*

Semi-structured interview, recruiter Albert, IT Power, 24/10/2019

If companies are willing to drop or lower the English requirement, then the question is whether there is indeed an economic value or usefulness for them in having candidates with English skills, or if the value is only defined by the logic of getting more skills for less pay. Recruiter Claudia, from Spencer Senior, treats English skills as a variable that can be “flexibilized” or adjusted. The salary for an International Project Manager with native-like English skills level may be too costly for a company. In such case Claudia negotiates the English skills level of the profile by reviewing the job functions in relation to English skills.

### Extract 5.27

*CLA: Nosotros por ejemplo en cuanto al idioma es un requisito que nosotros podemos flexibilizar para bajar el salario. Imagínate que ellos, este perfil internacional no pueden pagar 80. Yo puedo jugar con los requisitos. Vale. ¿Que tendrá que hacer esta persona en inglés? ¿Vale? ¿Qué interlocutores tendrá? ¿Por qué necesita tanto el inglés? Igual nos damos cuenta y detectamos que inglés no es tan importante para la posición como pensábamos. Entonces podemos flexibilizar este requisito y podría valernos un inglés de esta chica. Habla bien el inglés. Aprendería también los tecnicismos de allí. (...) Es una de las variables que evaluamos a la hora de flexibilizar un perfil. Es una variable importante que podemos flexibilizar. (...) Ellos te dicen “queremos el inglés casi nativo” ¿Vale? Entonces cuando ves que el salario no se adecua, que no tenemos candidatos con inglés casi nativos con este salario, o no los encontramos, no pasa nada igual no es porque el salario, no es por el salario, igual es que no los encontramos. O no los hay o no son fáciles de encontrar. Entonces decimos, dime, ¿cómo tendrá que ser su día a día? ¿Con quién tendrá que hablar en inglés? ¿En qué ocasiones tendrá que hablar en inglés? Igual el único inglés que tiene que hablar es con los distribuidores. Luego con los clientes tiene otro interlocutor que puede hablar en la lengua X. O igual es porque, por ejemplo, el inglés que tenga que hablar solo es a nivel interno de la*

compañía. ¿Más bajo? Exacto, podría ser más bajo. No va a tener que hacer una negociación en inglés. Está hablando en una reunión como podríamos estar hablando, bueno, en una reunión de negocio interna de la compañía. (...) Entonces yo pregunto mucho: ¿exactamente qué tendrá que hacer en inglés esta persona? Porque si se tiene que reunir una vez al mes con ciertas personas internas de la compañía, o el interlocutor o la comunicación es con cierta persona, es decir, con tu homólogo (...), igual tampoco te hace tener el inglés nativo para este tipo de comunicación. Vamos a intentar flexibilizar y bajar un poco este requisito. (...) Es que va todo en relación. ¿Por qué te crees que cobramos más para encontrar un salario y un perfil más alto? Porque hay menos. Siempre va a ver menos candidatos con un salario más alto, porque son candidatos que tienen más requisitos. Entonces va todo en conjunto.

### Translation of Extract 5.27

CLA: *For example, as far as language is concerned, it is a requirement that we can make more flexible in order to lower the salary. Imagine that they can't pay 80 for this international profile. What will this person have to do in English? Ok? What interlocutors will this person have? Why does she need English so much? Maybe we realise that English is not as important for the position as we thought. Then we can relax this requirement and this girl's English might work for us. She speaks English well. She would also learn their technical jargon. (...) this is one of the variables that we evaluate when it comes to making a profile more flexible. It is an important variable that we can make more flexible. (...) They tell you "we want near-native English", right? So, when you see that the salary is not adequate, that we don't have candidates with near-native English at this salary, or that we can't find them, it's fine, maybe it's not because of the salary, it's not because of the salary, maybe it's just that we can't find them. Either there aren't any or they are not easy to find. So, we say, tell me, what will her daily life be like? Who will she have to speak English with? On what occasions will she have to speak English? Maybe the only English she must speak is with the distributors. Then with customers she has another interlocutor who can speak in X language. Or maybe it's because, for example, the English she must speak is only at the internal level of the company. Lower? Exactly, it could be lower. She's not going to have to do a negotiation in English. She's speaking in a meeting like we could be speaking, well, in an internal company business meeting. (...) So I ask a lot: What exactly is this person going to have to do in English? Because if this person must meet once a month with certain people within the company, or the interlocutor or the communication is with a certain person, that is, with your counterpart (...), maybe it doesn't mean that you have to be a native English speaker for this type of communication. We are going to try to relax and lower this requirement a bit. It's all related. (...) Why do you think we charge more to find a higher salary and profile? Because there are fewer of them. There will always be fewer candidates with a higher salary, because they are candidates who have more requirements. Therefore, it all goes together.*

Short post-interview conversation, recruiter Claudia, Spencer Senior, 10/10/2018

Recruiters use English skills strategically with companies. By renegotiating the English skills requirement, they promote their services and retain clients by offering cost-effective solutions. At the same time, recruiters may also use English skills to

negotiate salary with candidates. While typically candidates get a higher salary for their knowledge of English, they can also be penalized for not having the right skills level.

At the end of the interview a recruiter typically discusses the job offer details such as work schedule, social benefits, and salary. Candidates are delicately asked about their current salary, which they often disclose with a bit of hesitation, and the recruiter then asks them to state an amount that would be acceptable for them in order to take the job offer. Candidates are expected to name a figure which is two or three thousand euro higher than their current salary, or to give their last salary if they are unemployed. It is then up to the recruiter to offer candidates a salary that is within the salary range specified by the client and that reflects the candidates' skills. At Spencer Junior, I observe several interviews for a Junior Accountant position at a multinational company. The job announcement states that English skills are indispensable for this position, and fluent French is required:

**Image 5.8**  
Job announcement

La persona seleccionada trabajará dentro del departamento Financiero, reportando a Dirección Financiera, y realizando funciones administrativas-contables para posteriormente especializarse y consolidarse como contable a través de un plan de desarrollo y crecimiento dentro de la empresa.

Seleccionamos un perfil con formación en ADE, Empresariales o similar. Imprescindible nivel de inglés y francés fluidos y buen nivel de Excel. Persona dinámica, resolutiva y motivada con gusto por el trabajo en equipo.

**Translation of Image 5.8**

*The person selected will work in the Financial department, reporting to Finance Direction, carrying out functions of an Accountant-Administrative, to later receive further specialization and be consolidated as Accountant through a development and growth plan inside the company.*

*We are selecting a profile with ADE training, Business or similar. Indispensable fluent English and French and good level of Excel. A dynamic person, a problem-solver, motivated, and a team worker.*

Job announcement for a Junior Accountant, Spencer Junior, 13/04/2018

Recruiter Carla organizes a short conversation with the candidate in English. The candidate's level is an average intermediate. The questions the recruiter asks are all answered properly, but the candidate does not expand on them. Later on, the candidate is asked the same questions in Spanish, and she answers in Spanish in the same way. At

the end of the interview Carla makes a comment about the candidate's English. She points out that English is very important for the company and that the candidate should prepare it for the interview, and that she could improve it.

### **Extract 5.28**

CAR: Aunque la empresa es multinacional, también es un poco familiar, te pueden ofrecer posibilidades de crecer. Una persona va a jubilar, y por eso buscan una persona que en futuro podría asumir más responsabilidad. Tema de los idiomas, el inglés es importante, es una empresa multinacional, inglés si te puedes preparar un poco para entrevista, sería genial. El inglés tienes la base muy bien pero también puedes avanzar un poco más.

### **Translation of Extract 5.28**

CAR: *Although the company is multinational, also it is a bit family-run, they can offer you possibilities to grow. One person is going to retire, and that is why they are looking for a person that in the future could take on more responsibility. (On) the issue of languages, English is important, it's a multinational company, English, if you can prepare (it) a bit for the interview, it would be great. You have a good base in English but you could also advance a bit more.*

Interview observation, recruiter Carla, Spencer Junior 13/04/2018

When the salary negotiation takes place, Carla suggests that in the report to the firm (recruiters always write up a report on the candidates they interview), she would write down 23 instead of 25 in the salary box, because the candidate could still improve her English, and her French "was a bit forgotten". The salary margin for this position is 23-25 thousand euro, as it appears on the published job offer. The candidate accepts Carla's judgement, since Carla, the candidate says, knows the firm better. Three days later an interview for the same position is carried out. In the post-interview conversation with me, recruiter Carla makes an explicit comment that companies like to ask for English skills which candidates then do not use on the job. Carla expands on this statement by adding that she knows the structure of the client firm very well. While languages skills are requested for communication with the headquarters in France, it is the Senior Accountant that is responsible for communications with the headquarters. The Junior Accountant, which is the position she is recruiting for, would generally only need to communicate in Spanish or Catalan. This case shows that for a position of Junior Accountant, a candidate who knows two languages, but not perfectly, is offered a lower salary within the suggested salary range.

This section has focused on how recruiters build their recruitment practices around the economic value of English skills. Recruiters provide counsel to companies regarding which salary ranges to establish for open positions, and they have established a price for English skills. Moreover, by including language skills in the job requirements, they create an inflated demand for these skills, which they can then use for their own profit. Recruiters also use English skills strategically for negotiation of candidate profiles with their clients. At the same time, they act on candidates' insecurity about their own English skills in order to lower their salary expectations and make them more appealing for the potential employer. In addition, recruiters have formulated a whole discourse about how English skills should be appraised within the salary range for a given job offer. This encourages individuals to acquire and improve English skills in the hopes of increasing their material gain, all the context of a neoliberal economy where overqualified and overskilled professionals are clearly underpaid (Brown, Cheung, and Lauder, 2015: 210).

### **5.5 The added value of other languages**

This section explores the value assigned to languages other than English in recruitment practices. Multilingual workers' skills are considered to be generally useful for the workplace (Gazzola, 2016), although it has been pointed out that their value is symbolic, rather than instrumental (Holborow, 2018).

Online platforms, where job postings are published, typically categorize their job offers by sector, location, and job title. However, some platforms have emerged where job postings are categorized by required language skills. The logic behind such an idea is that some companies may have difficulty in finding candidates with a particular European language, and therefore, they would prefer to carry out their candidate search by language skills. Investigation into one such platform, which specializes in finding multilingual speakers for job postings across Europe, has led me to believe that the job market for multilingual skills in Spain is relatively small. These conclusions are in accordance with the data on job postings that include a requirement for languages other than English, as covered in the Context Chapter. Martina, a Manager who works for a multilingual online platform and who manages multilingual job positions for Spain, has pointed out that there are few multilingual Spanish candidates available:



### Extract 5.29

MAR: It's a bit contradictive because in Spain there is a lot of people who do not have a job, and they are actively searching for a job, but at the same time in Spain there aren't many people who speak languages, so it is indeed the biggest candidate market in general but not for us. Because we, in Spain education is not focused around languages, so out of the total of people who are unemployed in Spain, only a small fraction is, not eligible, but is suitable to the profile of our job board. So, we do have candidates, but we can find them more in other countries I guess.

Semi-structured interview, Martina, Multilingual Job Platform, 06/02/2018

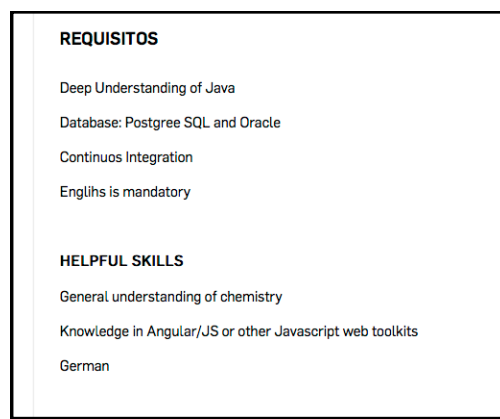
At Spencer and IT Power, when candidates' English skills are being checked, recruiters tend to ask them if they know any other language other than English, even if there is no requirement for another language. This data is primarily collected for inclusion in their database, but the information about candidates' language skills is also used for the promotional activities recruiters undertake. Recruiters send out promotional ads to various firms in order to attract clients. In these ads, called blind reports (*informe en ciego*), they present the skills of the candidate profiles they interview. Having multilingual candidates serves a larger sales strategy, even these additional languages not among job the requirements.

The way candidates talk about their foreign language skills in interviews is indexical for recruiters, and it may affect the course of the selection process. During an interview at Spencer Elite for the position of Creative Director of a German watch brand, recruiter Bruno asks the top candidate if he speaks any other foreign language besides English. When Bruno asks him about French, the candidate answers back in French, and the same happens with Italian. After the interview, Bruno points out to me that he did not explicitly ask the candidate to answer back in the language he inquired about. Moreover, Bruno himself speaks French and Italian, and he claims that the candidate was making mistakes. Bruno goes on to say that the candidate was showing off his knowledge of other languages, in spite of his having nothing to be proud of. The conclusion that Bruno draws out of this situation is that the candidate is too desperate to change his job. Even though no foreign language besides English is required for the given job position, the very inquiry results in a subjective recruiter's impression.

Job offers that require a foreign language other than English, always include a requirement for English as a matter of course. As shown in Image 5.9, English is in the

main job requirements, while German, in this case, is listed as a helpful skill. The required level of the second foreign language is typically lower than that of English. German, French, and to a lesser degree, Italian, are among the second language skills requirements that appear in job posts in Barcelona. German is mostly requested by the companies in the automotive industry, while French and Italian are asked for the Fashion and Retail sectors.

**Image 5.9**  
Job Announcement



Job announcement for a Java Programmer, IT Power, 15/04/2019

The way recruiters evaluate secondary foreign language skills indicates their hierarchical inferiority in relation to English. Interestingly, as recruiters do not normally have any personal knowledge of the second language in question, they rely on questions about the candidates' skills and trust that they are telling the truth, instead of carrying out a direct evaluation of the skill. For the position of a Junior Accountant (Image 5.9), English is listed as an indispensable skill, while fluent French is also required (original: *imprescindible nivel de inglés y francés fluidos*). At the interview, recruiter Carla asks the candidate about her French skills. The strategy is to determine the second language skill level based on the candidate's own self-assessment of her English and French knowledge, and to gather information on how and whether she uses French.

**Extract 5.30**

CAR: Did you use it at work, for example, in your last experience?  
CAN: yes, I used French and English too, and in my last job I used it not a lot but a little

CAR: what is your level in French?  
CAN: B2  
CAR: like English?  
CAN: I spent a lot of time in France and I learnt a lot the language  
CAR: (...) me has confirmado que el francés lo dominas bastante, ¿a nivel hablado o escrito?<sup>3</sup>  
CAN: mi hermana vive en Francia, y si, lo utilizo en el trabajo, es una buena oportunidad para aprender el idioma.<sup>4</sup>

Interview observation, recruiter Carla, Spencer Junior, 16/04/2018

Based on this short conversation, the recruiter concludes that the candidate stands out, as she is the only one out of the three candidates interviewed for this position who speaks French. Therefore, she is selected to be presented to the client. The recruiter made her decision based on the client's requirements, even though she is explicit that neither English nor French will be used on the job. French is among the requirements for this position, because the headquarters of the firm are in France.

The requirement for a second foreign language may be disregarded if there are no available candidates with such skill, on the basis that English will fulfil the communicative function.

### Extract 5.31

FAB: \*\*Short Trip, es una empresa que hace, sabes cómo se llama esto, emm, planes de vacaciones de fin de semana tipo ticket, es que tengo un nombre. Bueno, en resumen, que tienen un equipo, o sea internacional de personas aquí en Barcelona, que sí, que hablan en español, pero luego tienen que trabajar con gente que está en Francia, entonces tienen que hablar o bien en francés, pero no les es prioritario, o en inglés, el inglés sí que es prioritario.

### Translation of Extract 5.31

FAB: *\*\*Short Trip, is a company that makes, you know what it is called, emm, package weekend holiday plans, I am trying to find the word. Well, in short, they have an international team of people here in Barcelona, who, yes, speak Spanish, but then they have to work with people who are in France, so they have to speak either French, which is not a priority, or English, English is a priority.*

Short Conversation with recruiter Fabian, IT Power, 15/04/2019

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<sup>3</sup> CAR: (...) you have confirmed to me that you have good knowledge of French, the speaking or writing level?

<sup>4</sup> CAN: my sister lives in France, and yes, I use it at work, it's a good opportunity to learn the language

In a similar vein, the candidates do, in fact report that they communicate with managers of non-European origin in English.

### **Extract 5.32**

- CAN: Y actualmente en mi trabajo pues la matriz está en Francia, por tanto todos los temas de emails/invoice todo lo que son conference los hacemos en inglés
- CAR: vale.
- CAN: por ejemplo hoy un consultor que viene y al final es un francés pero claro hablamos en inglés.

### **Translation of Extract 5.32**

- CAN: *And at the moment in my job, the head office is in France, so all the emails/invoice issues, all the conferences, we do them in English*
- CAR: *ok.*
- CAN: *for example, today a consultant is coming and he is a Frenchman but of course we speak in English.*

Interview observation, recruiter Carla, Spencer Junior, 16/03/2018

Two cases in the data set suggest that German companies are not very strict with the German skills requirement. Both are for high-ranking positions. The owners of the previously mentioned watch brand are looking for a Creative Director that would report directly to them. Although they are German, they do not list proficiency in German as a requirement because, according to recruiter Bruno, they are comfortable enough with communication in English. They also believe it is unlikely they will find a suitable German speaker for this position and do not, therefore, want to limit the scope of their search based on this criterion.

A Chief Financial Officer of German parentage who grew up in Spain admits that, although she spoke to her German bosses in Germany, she generally used English for international meetings. She explains that she was not hired on the basis of knowing German, but the fact that she speaks German is understandably a plus. Maria also explains that her English skills, especially the fact that she went to a German school and learned English properly, have played a role in her success at job interviews.

### **Extract 5.33**

- MAR: Ok, I started as the accounting manager, for one of the Spanish firms, and then during the years I got promoted several times and the last 6 years I was the CFO of all the Spanish companies of this group. They were 5 companies in Spain, and I was the CFO of the Spanish

group. Here with my team I spoke Spanish, with the bosses in Germany, which I reported to, I spoke German, and I used English for the international meetings, it was a very big company, a worldwide company, when we met, all the Finance, all the CFOs of the different countries, these meetings were in English, coz not every CEO of every country knew German, so this was in English.

RES: and that's why I guess they wanted somebody with the two languages, of course, of course, one to report and the other one for the...

MAR: yes, normally these types of companies, well they want someone at least you should speak or you should speak well English, and if you speak their language, it's a plus. But not the other way around because they can't pretend that everyone of every country in the world speaks correctly German to do the day-to-day job.

Semi-structured interview with candidate Maria, 13/11/2018

Even though companies with European headquarters do not prioritize a second language requirement for job posts, if such candidates are available, they represent great value and their nationality may play a role in hiring. In the case of the Shared Service Centres, the candidates who get jobs there are often nationals of the countries they work with. In this case, the second foreign language is essential to their job. The candidate who oversees a team of three or four people that cover operations for Germany and Poland explains that he chooses to have nationals of the countries he works with:

#### **Extract 5.34**

CAN: Yo siempre intento tener una, si no alemana, bilingüe. Entonces hay una chica que nació en Alemania, hace 10 o 12 años se fue a vivir a Galicia, porque sus padres son gallegos, con lo cual el alemán lo tiene, pues bilingüe. Después hay otra chica que es de aquí pero bueno también, pues como yo, ha ido aprendiendo y se defiende y después la chica que lleva estas dos es de Alemania, y la que lleva Austria y Polonia es polaca. Y el alemán, había estudiado algo, se defiende, entonces bien. Encontrar alguien que sabe polaco y alemán es un pelín demasiado.

#### **Translation of Extract 5.34**

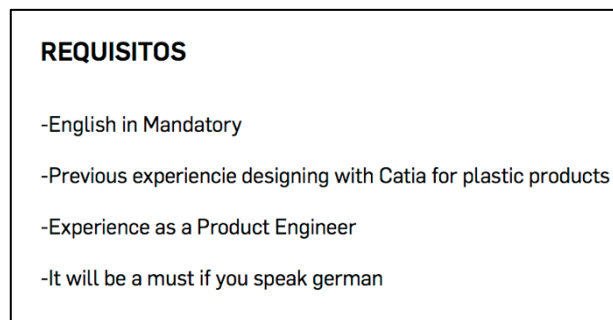
CAN: *I always try to have one of them, if not German, bilingual. Then there is a girl who was born in Germany, but 10 or 12 years ago she went to live in Galicia, because her parents are Galician, so she is bilingual. Then there is another girl who is from here but, like me, she has been learning and she can get by, and then the girl who speaks German is from Germany, and the one who covers Austria and Poland is Polish. And the German, he had studied something, he can get by, so it's good. To find someone who knows Polish and German is a bit too much.*

Interview observation, Spencer Senior, Candidate Manuel, 10/10/2018

In this case, the candidate uses German on a daily basis to read financial documents. He states that in spite of taking nearly three years of German conversation classes for work, he is losing the ability to speak German due to lack of practice.

When a second foreign language is essential to the job, it is difficult to find candidates for such positions. Even in such cases, recruiters do not generally believe that the second language skills are actually going to be useful. IT Power is fielding candidates for an available Product Engineer position at a multinational firm called “Innovation Tech” English and German are required for this position.

**Image 5.10**  
Job Announcement



Job announcement for a Product Engineer, 16/05/2019

In the database, the recruiter has a note on the language skills requirement: “Languages: English mandatory, if [candidate] has German, we will triumph” (*Idiomes: Angles obligatori. Si te alemany triomfem*). At the beginning, Victoria, the recruiter working on this offer, disregarded German, thinking that it was not important. However, the client insisted on it:

**Extract 5.35**

VIC: Ahora mismo no tengo nadie en el proceso. Porque he ido enviando gente, y me los descartan porque no tienen experiencia con un tipo, con una pieza, porque no son de automoción, y el último porque me dijeron que no tenía alemán. Y claro, yo pensaba que podría tener un alemán A2, entonces la gente que enviaba tenía inglés y A2, y me dijeron que no. Tiene que tener un alemán avanzado. Y entonces es muy complicado encontrar ese perfil porque no pagan mucho. Encima el alemán. Cuesta mucho encontrar, porque alguien que sepa inglés y alemán, pues me va a pedir, más dinero.

### Translation of Extract 5.35

VIC: *Right now, I don't have anyone in the process. Because I've been sending people in, and they're discarded because they have no experience with a type, with a pa::rt, because they're not from automotive sector, and the last one because they told me he didn't know German. And of course, I thought I could have A2 German, so the people I was sending had English and A2, and they said no. You must have advanced German. And then it's very difficult to find this profile because they don't pay much. On top of that, the Ge:rman. It's very difficult to find someone who knows English and German, because they are going to ask for more money.*

Post-interview conversation, recruiter Victoria, IT Power, 21/05/2019

Recruiter Victoria was following the established recruitment practice, in which a second foreign language is a plus. As stated by her in Extract 5.35, in such cases a beginner level would usually work for the employer. However, this employer ended up being strict on this requirement. In her interview with the candidate, Victoria warns him that German is an important requirement, and even though she cannot verify his level at the interview, the employer most certainly will.

### Extract 5.36

VIC: *Genial, Kevin, otra cosa. Er, te comenté el tema de, de alemán. Emm, es importante para la posición, vale. No lo han pedido específicamente, de hecho, el requerimiento, er, primer requerimiento era más un tema de inglés y alguna cosa de alemán. Pero luego nos hemos dado cuenta a través de feedback, que se tiene que hablar en alemán, yo me imagino que te harán alguna pregunta en, en alemán. Por eso también te lo, te lo pregunté. Y:, el inglés también. Entonces, el alemán la verdad es que no tengo ni idea de alemán, estoy intentando de aprenderlo, pero se me dificultó bastante. Pero sí que te tendría que hacer alguna preguntita en inglés. ¿De acuerdo?*

### Translation of Extract 5.36

VIC: *Great, Kevin, another thing. Er, I told you about German. Erm, it's important for the position, right. They didn't specifically ask for it, in fact the requirement, er, first requirement was more of English and some German. But then we found out through feedback, that you have to speak German, I imagine they'll ask you some questions in, in German. That's why I also asked you. A:nd, English too. So, the truth is that I have no idea about German, I'm trying to learn it, but it was quite difficult for me. But I would have to ask you some questions in English. Is that ok?*

Interview observation, recruiter Victoria, IT Power, 21/05/2019

This section has covered the role of language skills other than English in selection processes. Although German, French, and Italian may be found among job

requirements, they are typically listed as “helpful skills”. A requirement for a second foreign language is usually related to the client company having European headquarters or a European manager. It is believed that sufficient English skills can replace the knowledge of an additional foreign language. Therefore, for job descriptions requiring two languages, English skills are prioritized.

Recruiters are not generally familiar with the second language, therefore, their tactic to evaluate candidate’s eligibility for the post consists in asking candidates questions regarding their use and knowledge of the second language. It is also assumed that less advanced knowledge of the second language is sufficient for most posts. If candidates with both English and a second language are found, they are prioritized in the selection process, in accordance with the recruiters’ mission to tick all relevant boxes. Companies that require two languages seek out candidates whose nationalities correspond to the desired language competency. Consequently, these findings confirm that English skills are given preference in selection processes and are considered instrumental, while the second foreign language often has symbolic value. Nevertheless, the knowledge of a second language may have an impact on the outcome of a selection process. All things stated, knowing a language other than English ensures a better match firms’ desired employee profile. However, as new business models such as shared service centres become more common, knowledge of a second foreign language is likely to become an increasingly essential skill in the modern labour market.



## Chapter 6 English Skills as a Filtering Tool

This chapter focuses on the recruitment practices of screening and candidate evaluation on the basis of the English skills criterion. The way English is evaluated throughout all stages of the selection process is related to the complex conditions of a labour market characterized by a surplus of job-seekers (Granovetter, 1995). It is also the result of the way recruitment agencies function and their role as an intermediary business (Coverdill and Finlay, 2002). Their matchmaking role, which consists in bringing the candidates and the firms to each other, is overridden by the commitment to find the candidate profiles that match their clients' demands. Both recruiters and their client firms understand that there are many jobs that do not require English skills, hence the distinction that recruiters make between English as a work instrument and English as a plus. Nevertheless, clients continue to reject candidates on the basis of "insufficient" English skills, which ultimately shapes how recruiters structure their screening and evaluation processes.

In an effort to manage client expectations, recruiters make multiple decisions influenced by the English language criterion (Gershon, 2017; Rivera, 2016), such as posting a job description in English, carrying out screening and LinkedIn search of candidates by use of the language skills filter, asking job applicants about their English skills on the phone even if they are not present in the requirement. These decisions ultimately lead to an overall institutional gatekeeping practice (Kirilova, 2013; Pájaro, 2018; Tranekjea, 2015). We can see the effects of such a practice in the recruitment pattern emerging in Spain, where whether one gets a job is largely dependent on English skills.

Recruiters put themselves in the position of authority to evaluate candidates' English skills. They carry out short oral conversations with candidates on the phone and at interviews. The parameter that defines language competence is equated with good communicative ability, or fluency. Therefore, the candidates that do not demonstrate the required fluency, are deemed incompetent, that is lacking the sufficient skill level in order to carry out their job (Allan, 2013). This discrepancy—between the evaluative practice and the way in which candidates are meant to use English on the job—points to an additional role that English skills play in selection that is related not the job, but

rather to the recruitment practice itself and the type of profile companies are after. In this way, the evaluation practice turns English into a soft skill (Urciuoli, 2019; Flubacher, Duchêne, and Coray, 2018) that can be interpreted as a communicative ability that represents a candidate fit. Thus, language skills are a sort of predictor (Viswesvaran and Ones, 2010) or an insurance policy for recruiters that the clients will like and accept the candidates.

Finally, client companies often choose to hire recruitment agencies because recruitment agencies can provide them with the candidate they are after without the need to be transparent about candidate selection parameters. The economic benefit that companies draw from demanding English skills is achieved not because English skills are useful (and therefore profitable) in the workplace, but rather because of the kind of candidate profile they help to capture. The English skills requirement is often a proxy for other desirable attributes, such as younger age and international work experience. Junior profiles are associated with better English skills and they are cheaper to hire, which incentivizes companies to hire younger workers with fewer professional qualifications, thus lowering salary costs. This further exacerbates the labour market conditions and disproportionately affects the older generation of workers, who have more difficulty accessing better-paid positions as a result.

### **6.1 Politics of a job announcement**

This section refines the relationship between recruiter and client with the aim of explaining why and how recruiters set up a language criterion that demands a higher level of English than the actual use function of English skills for a given position. This practice is one of the strategies employed by recruiters to ensure that clients do not reject candidates on the basis of the English skills requirement, and it is a practice that conforms with the professional role of a recruiter and the agency's function as an intermediary business (Finlay and Coverdill, 2002). This practice creates a selection pattern that eventually shapes which candidates are selected for advertised job posts on an industry-wide level.

The first communication between recruiter and client regarding language skills takes place when the recruiter gets a job order. In this conversation, a recruiter takes note of the job requirements, which typically include the job title; the job functions/tasks the

person will need to fulfil; the specific language skills, work experience, and personality features (such as leadership and the ability to work effectively in a team, among other soft skills); and other details, such salary and the work schedule. At Spencer Junior, recruiters state that they tend to ask clients about the language skills requirement, which prompts clients to discuss how important English skills are for a given position. In this way, the recruiter's routine information request immediately highlights language skills as important, which may contribute to the role it plays in the selection process. Also, the conditions of the labour market, characterized by high unemployment and fewer regulations (Bryson, James, and Keep, 2012), lead clients to believe they can be pickier with the candidates.

Specification of the language requirement during the first communication with the client is followed by overviewing of the job tasks in relation to English skills. Some recruiters renegotiate the language requirement when they estimate that availability of candidates with such skill may complicate selection. However, this type of negotiation is not a rule. As recruiters learn what job tasks their candidate will have to carry out in English, they have to decide which language criterion they will include in the job announcement and, subsequently, the screening parameters they will employ in their candidate search. As practice shows, they cannot be too literal with the English skills requirement, otherwise, they run the risk of candidate rejection on the basis of insufficient English skills. In that case, recruiters would have to revise the job posting by changing the language criterion, publish it anew, and wait for new candidates to apply, which can cause them to lose the client.

Recruiter Fabien, from IT Power, shares his experience about a case with a recurring client, who is looking for engineers to work at a tech company specializing in network communications. This client defines the English skills requirement for a Network Engineer position as necessary for reading technical documentation. Fabien admits that he has already filled a few positions for this client, and that English skills were wholly unnecessary. However, as candidates are sent for interview with the manager, they are discarded due to "insufficient" English skills:

### Extract 6.1

FAB: Mando el candidato, mando un par de candidatos que realmente tienen el inglés pues, bueno, para comprender un manual técnico y leer cosas, especificaciones, o contestar un correo y demás y (.). “el inglés no lo tienen muy bueno, uh ¿qué ha pasado aquí?”

### Translation of Extract 6.1

FAB: *I send a candidate, I send a couple candidates that really have English, well, good, to understand a technical manual and read things, specifications or to answer a mail and more and (.). “They don’t have very good English, huh, what happened here?”*

Short conversation, recruiter Fabien, IT Power, 10/04/2019

The client’s initial request does not coincide with his expectations about the candidate’s English level. Therefore Fabien, who has considered the literal job function in relation to English and verified that the candidate has the necessary knowledge to do his job, has to set up a stricter requirement for English skills and run the selection process again. This time, he makes sure that the candidate he sends can demonstrate good communication skills. This is a case in which English skills appear to not be necessary on the job (referred to as an added value henceforth). In the end, the client goes with the candidate who, according to Fabien, is not actually very good at English, but who is taking English conversation classes.

In the next selection process, Fabien is recruiting a Sales Engineer. He states that the client asked for a high level of English, which Fabien interprets as an added value. In light of this interpretation, he looks for a client who can communicate well. However, English results in being an *essential* skill and an even greater, near-native, level is required, according to the feedback the client provides after rejecting candidates on the basis of their English skills.

### Extract 6.2

FAB: Aquí lo que pasó/ es que yo creo que quizá cometimos algún error en la hora de definir bien la job description, no/ lo cual te puede llevar a errores como el nivel de inglés, y tú estar seleccionando a gente mal, no/ y yo creo que una de las cosas que pudo pasar fue esta, y claro, no teníamos marcado un nivel de inglés que no conocíamos que realmente era muy importante el nivel de inglés, no/. Entonces al principio bueno, pues mandamos gente/, igual hicimos un par de entrevistas, enviamos buenos candidatos que tenían toda la parte técnica o lo que requería, no/ pero no tenían el inglés, (.). y nos, “no, no, descartado, no tiene el inglés”, y claro, aquí dices, ostras! he perdido el tiempo y eficacia, he perdido...

## Translation of Extract 6.2

**FAB:** *Here what happened/ is that I think that maybe we made a mistake when we defined the job description, right/ which can lead to mistakes such as the level of English, and you are selecting the wrong people, right/ and I think that one of the things that could have happened was this, and of course, we didn't have marked a level of English that we didn't know was really very important, the level of English, right/. So at the beginning good, well, we sent people/, we did a couple of interviews, we sent good candidates who had all the technical skills or what was required, right/ but they didn't have English, (.) and we, "no, no, discarded, they don't have English", and of course, here you say, oh, I've wasted my time and efficiency, I've wasted...*

Short conversation, recruiter Fabien, IT Power, 15/04/2019

This creates a similar situation for Fabien, where he has to start the selection process again by setting up a stricter English requirement. Fabien adds the English skills requirement to the job title in order to indicate how important English is, in addition to setting up an English skills parameter that would confirm candidates' level at the moment of application by means of screening questions (screening parameters are further explored in section 6.3).

## Extract 6.3

**FAB:** En este caso se canceló la última vez que fue la que yo gestioné, pues vale y claro, el tema del inglés supuso un poco de problema, no/. Entonces yo lo que hago/ xxx, (...), lo que quiero que veas aquí, es que como yo tuve ese problema, (: ) ay, ay, mira como lo publiqué (:), en inglés (...) Sales Engineer inglés C1 o C2, en el título. Porque (.) quería (.) ser (.) exigente en ello, o sea, si no tienes el inglés C1 o C2 ni te molestes a dar click!. Porque creo que es una manera buena, pero si tu realmente tienes un nivel de inglés C1 o C2/ Qué vas a decir? Ostras lo tengo, voy a ver qué es, a ver esto qué es

**RES:** claro, sí, y has descartado 200 personas.

**FAB:** sí, 200 personas

## Translation of Extract 6.3

**FAB:** *In this case it was cancelled the last time the one I managed, well, right and of course, the topic of English was a bit of a problem, right/. Then what I do/, xxx, (...), what I want you to see here, is how I had this problem, (: ) ay, ay, look how I published it, (: ) in English (...) Sales Engineer English C1 or C2, in the title. Because (.) I wanted (.) to be (.) exigent about that, well, if you don't have C1 or C2 English don't even bother to click! Because I think that it is a good way, but if you really have a C1 or C2 level of English/ What are you going to say? Golly I have it, I am going to see what is, to see that this is*

**RES:** *clearly, yes, and you discarded 200 persons.*

**FAB:** *yes, 200 persons*

Short conversation, recruiter Fabien, IT Power, 10/04/2019

Recruiters gather feedback from clients about the candidates they have sent and the candidates that were hired, and it is this feedback that makes them include English skills in the requirement even when they are not needed. They also make the English skills requirement higher and choose candidates who can demonstrate their skills in the interviews. This becomes a matter of efficiency and a guarantee that the client will accept the candidate. Fabien explains his recruitment experiences with English skills in terms of his own errors or a non-well-defined parameter that he later has to readjust by raising the English skill criterion for the positions described above. However, it is the client's expectations and the negative feedback that produce a difference that actually make him tighten the requirement.

Fabien, who considers himself a junior recruiter, learns from this experience and starts anticipating the clients' expectations. He starts publishing job announcements with a higher English requirement or he publishes them directly in English, which indicates that English is an essential skill. Job orders that recruiters receive from multinational companies are often in English as part of corporate policy. Recruiters at Spencer and IT Power have to translate them into Spanish in order to publish them on the webpage, which is a standard practice. The conventional understanding about the job announcements is that when they are published in English, it means that the position requires English as an essential skill. In these cases, the English requirement will not be mentioned, since it is assumed that a person who does not know English well will not apply for a position that is advertised in English. Fabien is aware of these conventions because he makes an explicit reference to them. However, after miscalculating the appropriate English level for the Sales Engineer position, he begins thinking about English skills more strategically. For the next position, which he receives with no English requirement, he publishes the announcement directly in English. He states that he left the job posting in English out of convenience. The idea is to see if candidates apply and change the job posting into Spanish if no one does. However, this practice is only possible thanks to a large pool of available candidates. Fabien treats a second job position for a Java Developer in the same way, including an explicit intermediate English skills requirement, as stated by the client. According to the client, the candidate is required to be able to understand English and follow a conversation.

#### Extract 6.4

FAB: Y bueno, es un perfil bastante potente la verdad, aunque bueno, valoran también perfiles no tan potentes, porque como tienen muy poquitos desarrolladores Java, pues eso sería lo más prioritario (...). Ya la publicaré supongo que mañana. Emm, no sé cómo lo voy a hacer en este caso. Se publicará o en inglés o en español. Pero creo que lo publicaremos en inglés, siguiendo lo mismo que hicimos el otro día. (...) Mucho más fácil. No voy a tener que traducir nada, sencillamente maquetar un poco la plantilla que yo tengo del otro día junto con esta que me han pasado ellos.

#### Translation of Extract 6.4

FAB: *And well, it's quite a powerful profile truly, although they also value profiles that are not so powerful, because as they have very few Java developers, well that would be the priority (...). I'll publish it tomorrow, I guess. Emm, I don't know how I'm going to do it in this case. It will be published either in English or in Spanish. But I think we will publish it in English, following what we did the other day. (...) Much easier. I'm not going to have to translate anything, I'll just do a little layout of the template I have from the other day together with this one they gave me.*

Short conversation, recruiter Fabien, IT Power, 15/04/2019

It is now a matter of efficiency for Fabien to choose candidates with a higher level of spoken English, and it is also easier and faster to publish the job offer in English, as received from the client. Publishing the job announcement in English optimizes Fabien's time but it also creates a requirement for English that was not originally there.

At IT Power, recruiters do not deal with clients directly as there is a special sales department that is responsible for attracting new clients and managing communications with them. Victoria, a recruiter at IT Power, is recruiting for a position of a .NET programmer in Jaen. Because she thinks finding a person with good English skills is going to be hard in that part of Spain, she decides to call her sales manager in order to find out how to set up a language requirement. The sales manager cannot tell her how strict the client is, so she has to decide on her own how to approach this position.

#### Extract 6.5

VIC: .NET o sea que tiene que saber pues estos lenguajes, como pone aquí: C#, .NET, y que tiene que tener al menos un B1 en inglés, no hace falta que el inglés sea muy avanzado, pero que más o menos se defienda. Porque es la lengua que utilizan allí. Entonces según me ha comentado bien esta persona tiene que hablar de vez en cuando con la gente del equipo, que a lo mejor hablan en inglés. Entonces, aunque es una tarea muy técnica, pues me imagino que me esperan una comunicación y eso, vale. Entonces es un poco esto. Sí que es verdad que para esta posición que sabes me interesa, como no es avanzado lo que meten

quizás me interesa más la parte técnica, vale, que el inglés, pero algo de inglés sí que tiene que tener. O sea, a lo mejor en la entrevista podemos hacer alguna pregunta más sencilla. Un poco por si más o menos se puede defender, y ya está.

### Translation of Extract 6.5

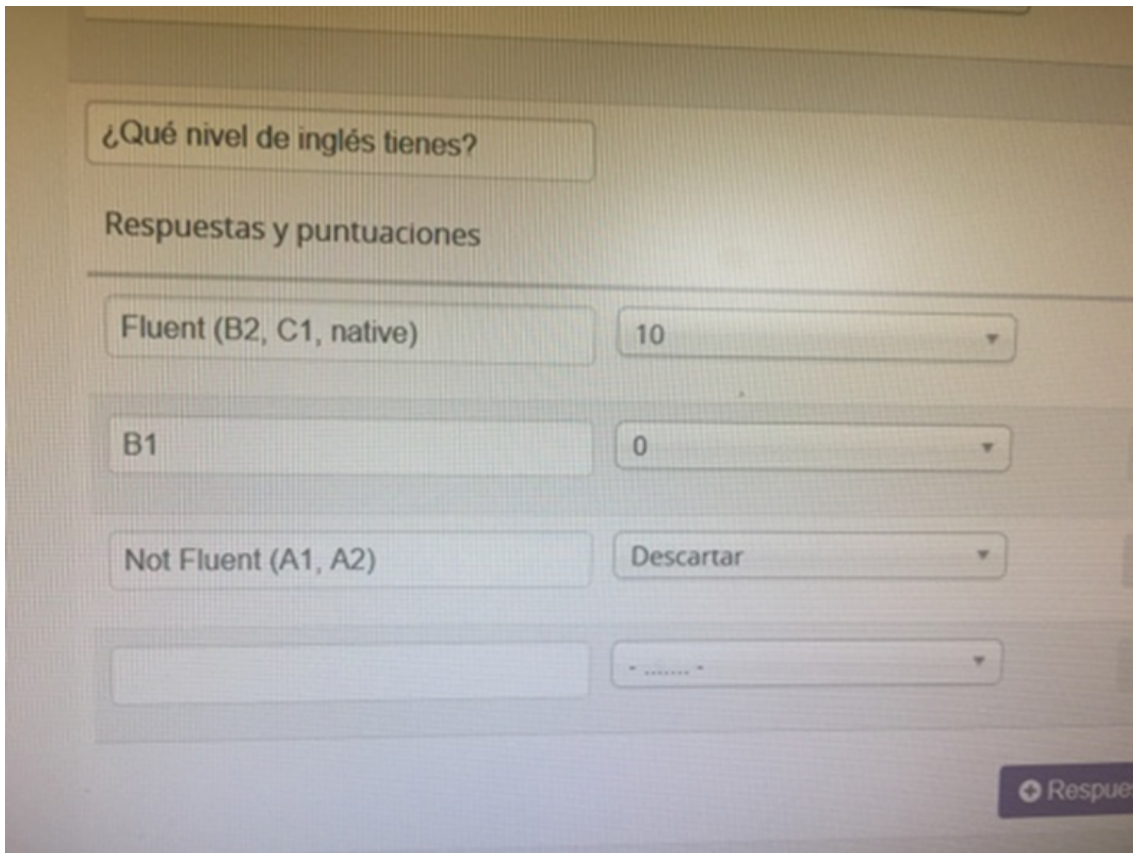
*VIC: .NET, so you have to know these languages, as it says here: C#, .NET, and you have to have at least a B1 in English, you don't need to be very advanced in English, but you have to be more or less able to get by. Because that's the language they use there. So, according to what he told me, this person has to talk from time to time with the people in the team, who may speak English. So, although it is a very technical task, I imagine that they expect some communication and so on, ok. So, it's a bit like that. It's true that for this position that you know I'm interested in, as it's not advanced, maybe I'm more interested in the technical part than in English, but he must have some English. In other words, maybe in the interview we can ask some simpler questions. Just to see if you can more or less get by, and that's it.*

Short conversation, recruiter Victoria, IT Power, 17/04/2019

The main concern for Victoria is to know how well the candidate is expected to communicate in English. While Victoria knows the approximate job function, the requirement she sets up has to guarantee that her candidate will be accepted by the client. So far, Victoria has set up the screening parameter (Image 6.1) so that it prioritizes candidates with a B2 or above. However, after the conversation with the manager, she decides to also accept CVs with the B1 level because she thinks there might be no candidates in Jaen with better English. The requirement is lowered only due to a perceived lack of candidates, determined by the job's location. Victoria does not know whether the client will accept a candidate with a lower English skills level. Even if she had direct contact with the client herself, she would still have difficulty communicating her concern about the level of English skills because there are no objective parameters being used to evaluate English skills. There is no way for Victoria or other recruiters to know what the clients will make of their candidates' English skills. Nor is there a way to prove that English skills are the real culprit when candidates are rejected.



**Image 6.1**  
Killer Questions



¿Qué nivel de inglés tienes?

Respuestas y puntuaciones

Fluent (B2, C1, native)	10
B1	0
Not Fluent (A1, A2)	Descartar
	.....

Respues

Killer question for .NET Programmer, IT Power, 17/04/2019

This section has looked into the relationship between recruiter and client in order to unpack how the English skills requirement is shaped by the analysis of the outcomes of selection processes by the recruiter. The complexity of this relationship results from the role of recruitment agencies as intermediaries who depend heavily on their clients' decisions. When clients reject candidates on the basis of a given parameter, recruiters are not in the position to argue that the candidate they have presented has the knowledge and the ability to carry out work tasks. Because of this power imbalance, recruitment agencies have adjusted the English skills requirement so that it minimizes the risk of candidate rejection. The intermediation of recruitment agencies (Bonet, Cappelli and Hamori, 2013) in the recruitment process has an effect on what levels of English are considered sufficient to carry out job tasks, and what kind of English is good enough for gaining access to those jobs in the first place. The surplus of job-seekers makes it possible for clients and recruiters to raise the expected level of English. The

English skills requirement, which is not justified by the job function, is legitimized through the practices of the intermediary recruitment agencies. For recruitment agencies, the rejection of candidate serves as legitimization for setting the English skills criterion higher.

## **6.2 Automatic screening and killer questions**

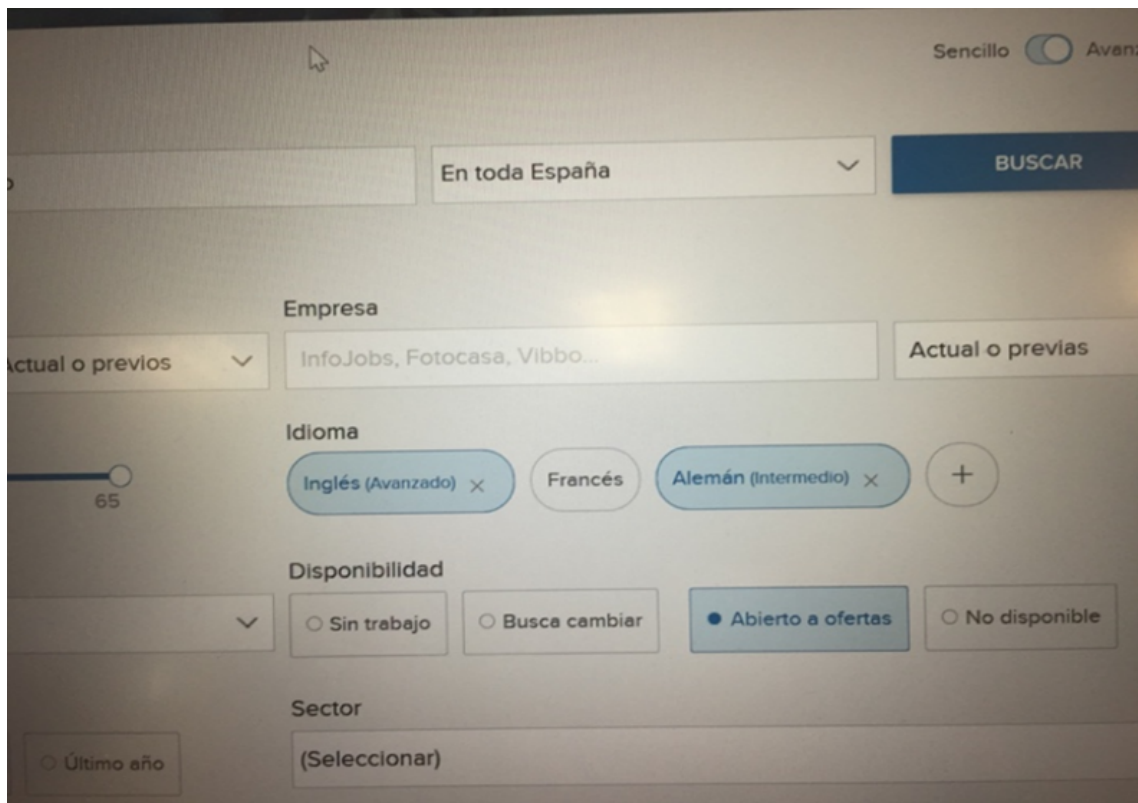
This section explores how recruiters use English skills as a parameter for automatic screening and in their online candidate search in order to facilitate candidate selection. Recruitment firms receive a great number of job applications due to high unemployment, high frequency of changing jobs, and the ease with which people can apply for jobs online. The information included in job applications has become detailed and so have the requirements for the job posts recruiters manage. Therefore, recruitment agencies have implemented the use of technology in order to automatize screening processes. Some authors argue that modern recruitment now resembles mere data processing because an important part of selection is managed by automatic computer systems (Rivera, 2020). The role of automated screening and search tools in recruitment needs to be considered from a critical perspective, as they clearly have impact on recruitment outcomes; the actual role of some of the parameters recruiters employ in automated screening also remains under-explored (Cappelli, 2012; Viswesvaran and Ones, 2010; Rivera, 2020).

One of the most important things for recruiters is the database they work with. Recruiter databases contains information on candidates such as CVs and the data they gather from phone-screening and interviews. This information allows recruiters to quickly produce a list of candidates for the job posts they manage. LinkedIn, a corporate professional platform, is typically integrated with the recruiters' company database, which allows agencies to track candidates' careers in real time. The information that LinkedIn users provide about themselves is crucial for recruiters because knowing where a candidate is employed can help recruiters make decisions about a candidate's potential eligibility for a job post and assess the chances of said candidate agreeing to change jobs. Recruiters save time by not having to search for this information.

LinkedIn is also used by recruiters in order to search for candidates' profiles, especially when they do not have enough candidates in their own database or in the

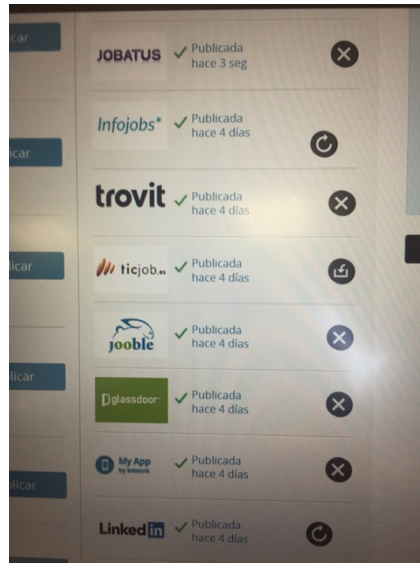
case of complicated searches. Victoria, from IT Power, uses LinkedIn to look for candidates. In the search parameters, she typically introduces language skills for all positions she works on (Image 6.2). She explains that if she does not do so, she will get “a million candidates”. In these cases, she uses English skills as a screening tool. The automated system used by IT Power allows recruiters to instantly publish job postings on a large number of available job-search websites and portals, including the professional LinkedIn network, as can be seen in Image 6.3.

**Image 6.2**  
LinkedIn Candidate Search



Search for candidate profiles on LinkedIn by language, IT Power, 21/05/2019

**Image 6.3**  
Job Portals



Job portals where job announcements are posted automatically, IT Power, 21/05/2019

When job-seekers visit these portals and apply for jobs, the applications are gathered within the IT Power database where they are sorted according to the screening parameters that recruiters have set for the application process. As candidates upload their CVs, they are typically asked to answer a few questions. These are the screening parameters, also called “killer questions”, and their function is to carry out automatic screening of CVs, to discard the unsuitable applications, and to prioritize the CVs that match the main criteria outlined in the questions. English skills are consistently used as killer questions, since they are considered to be one of the main requirements for jobs in Barcelona. But recruiters also use questions about English as an optimization screening tool, which helps them to effectively reduce the number of online applications. These practices are legitimized by the discourse about English being important for their clients.

As can be seen in Image 6.4, when setting up killer questions, recruiters choose to refer to English skills in terms of levels. Each level is assigned points, according to which the application may be prioritized over others or eliminated from the application system altogether. Each recruiter establishes their own screening parameters. However, typically, if candidates only have the minimum knowledge of English, recruiters do not even see their CVs.

**Image 6.4**  
Killer Questions<sup>5</sup>

Respuesta	Puntuación
No hablo inglés	Descartar
B1 o B2	5
C1	10

IT Power, 10/04/2019

In this system of killer questions, the C1 and C2 levels are always assigned the most points. Recruiter Fabien, from IT Power, has tested another way to check English skills in the killer questions. He offered job applicants two options: fluent or not fluent (Image 6.6), which is more in line with how recruiters actually evaluate English skills at interviews or via phone-screening. However, he stated that this approach did not yield good results. The way job applicants were evaluating their fluency did not produce the necessary screening effect on applications. He subsequently decided to use the language skill level approach, like most recruiters. Therefore, while recruiters are after

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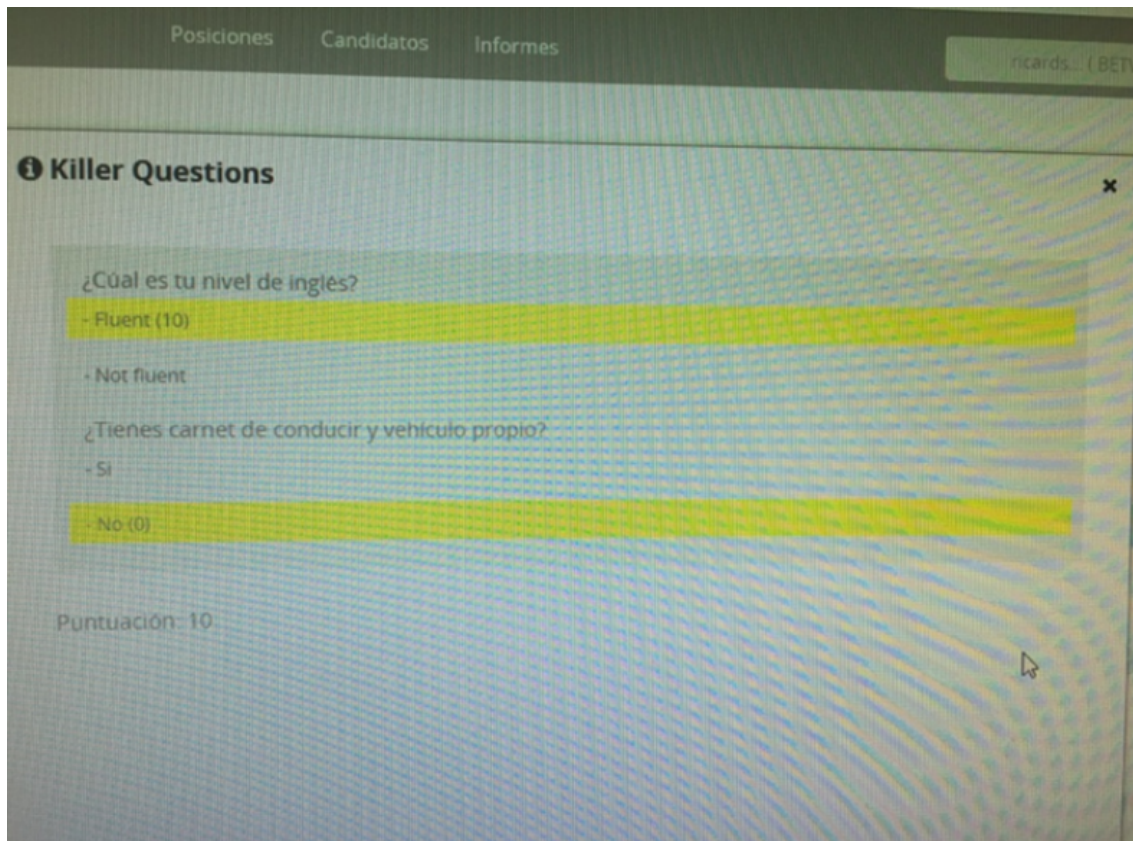
<sup>5</sup> **Translation of Image 6.4**

*What is your level of English? Answers and points.*

*I don't speak English - discard*

candidates' communicative abilities, they establish a language level baseline for applications, defined as the best approach in terms of screening outcomes.

**Image 6.5**  
Killer Questions<sup>6</sup>



IT Power, 10/04/2019

Using English skills in killer questions leads to a selection of candidates with a higher English skill level. Because such candidates' CVs are always given priority, this practice forms a selection pattern where the profiles that move forward in the selection process all have a better knowledge of English. According to recruiters, some candidates have learnt the way the screening system works and try to bypass it by lying on the killer questions. This is also true of how candidates present their English skills on CVs. These

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<sup>6</sup> **Translation of Image 6.5**

*What is your level of English?*

*Do you have a driving license and private vehicle?*

*-Yes*

*-No (0)*

claims justify recruiters' next step where they validate candidates' English skills level on the phone.

In Angel's experience, the candidates who apply for jobs at the tech hub "Tasty Co" mainly get discarded because of insufficient English. This fact is evidence that English skills do, indeed, serve as an effective screening tool. One of the problems that Angel also encounters once he starts calling the candidates whose CVs do match with the English requirement is that because they self-evaluate, they sometimes appear to be worse at English on the phone. This does not appear to be a major setback for recruiters, as they start by calling the candidates who scored the most on their online application.

### Extract 6.6

- RES: Is it that a lot of people get rejected because of their English levels?  
ANG: mostly, it's the first, the first  
RES: reason?  
ANG: yeah, yeah, yeah-yeah. The second one is the experience. Less year than required.  
RES: so, they don't meet the, the requirement for the English level?  
ANG: yeah, because they evaluate themselves, as they don't have the level as fluent or as advanced level  
RES: uhuh uhuh, okay, so you then you start phone calls, so you'd have to call all of those 150 people sometimes?  
ANG: yeah, not all of them, also I have to say that we start with the best candidates that we saw. For example, also you have the killer question, if you have a person that answered all of them very good, we start with these people because maybe they pass the level of English but they don't pass in other questions, so. Also, it's like emm, competition. It's like the person answer perfect all the questions, appear the first ones. So, we start to call that person. (...) Yeah, it's like a percentage, like the 85% of match with your role. ... We start with the highest percentage, and we go down, so as soon as for example we start calling ten candidates and ten candidates are interested, we start to interview them. And if they are success candidates, we don't continue, we are still going with these candidates. (...) On the phone usually I ask it's like 5 minutes call, because like you see we have to call a lot, so it's about expectations, to check that the killer questions are right, to talk with them in English, to see their expectations, why they want to move, honestly, why they want to move to Barcelona. This is the most typical question because also we want to see motivation because we are paying also the flight tickets, the relocation, and everything, so.

Semi-structured interview, recruiter Angel, Tasty Co, 06/11/2018

In the following extract (Extract 6.7), recruiter Catalina from IT Power explains that she needs to verify the English skill level of job applicants on the phone not just because their self-evaluations may not correspond to their actual competence, but also because she has to interpret the English requirement in the way that she thinks matches her

client's needs. This reflection portrays the complexity of the English skills requirement as it is designed at recruitment agencies. The intentionally vague description of the English requirement on the job announcement (usually stated as high or indispensable) is then followed by a question about the candidate's English skill level in the killer questions, which may be interpreted differently by the recruiter, the candidate, and the client. The significance of these different levels gets negotiated and decided by all the aforementioned stakeholders.

### Extract 6.7

- RES: ¿Tienes algún killer question en tu publicación de esta oferta?
- CAT: sí, sí. La killer question es, te la enseño. A ver. Ningún problema. Mira, la killer question que yo pongo aquí, por ejemplo, este candidato, primero de todo es "what is your level of English, advanced, intermediate, easy" and "what is your availability of incorporation and salary expectations" this is one example of what kind of killer questions I use to, to (...) Si es básico, directamente lo tengo descartado, ni lo veo. Si es intermedio sí que lo quiero, porque es gente que a lo mejor pone intermedio y puede ser avanzado, porque, a ver lo que es para ti intermedio y lo que es para mí avanzado. O no tiene certificación y tiene un buen nivel y pone intermedio que me ha pasado. Si es avanzado igualmente siempre valido, y siempre valido primero por teléfono, y este chico por teléfono dije, ostras, estaba en el metro cuando lo llamé, pensé, ostras a lo mejor no lo he pillado bien o lo que sea o tal y digo, "ven porque puede ser que sí", y ahora me acaba de confirmar que no. Entonces, si pongo intermedio no los descarto, (...) si es intermedio y no me encaja en nada lo descarto, pero si no, no lo descarto.
- RES: ¿y cuantos has descartado en este proceso entonces?
- CAT: pues claro, esta es una oferta muy reciente, yo llevo trabajando con esto desde diciembre, y ya te lo diré, pero aquí hay 23 descartados. Aquí hay 324 descartados. (...) Esta oferta lleva desde diciembre publicada.
- RES: sí, sí. Y dos finalistas de momento, como lo veo.

### Translation of Extract 6.7

- RES: *Do you have any killer question in your publication of this job posting?*
- CAT: *yes, yes. I will show you the killer question. Let's see. No problem. Look, the killer question that I put here, for example, this candidate, first of all is "what is your level of English, advanced, intermediate, easy" and "what is your availability for incorporation and salary expectations" this is one example of what kind of killer questions I use to, to (...) If it is basic, I have it discarded directly, I do not even see it. If it is intermediate, I do want it, because these are people who may put intermediate and it can be advanced, because, let's see what is intermediate for you and what is advanced for me. Or you do not have certification and you have a good level and you put intermediate, which has happened to me. If it is advanced, I always validate it, and I always validate it on the phone first, and this guy on the phone, I said, well, I was in the metro when I called him, I thought, well, maybe I did not get it right or whatever and I say, "come because maybe it is ok", and now he just confirmed that it is not. So, if I put intermediate, I do not discard them. So, if I put intermediate and I do not discard*



*them, if it is intermediate and they do not match in anything I discard them, but if they do not, I do not discard them.*

*RES: and how many have you discarded in this process then?*

*CAT: well clearly, this is a very recent job posting, I have been working on this since December, and I will tell you, but here there are 23 discarded. Here there are 324 discarded. This job posting has been published since December.*

*RES: yes, yes, and two finalists at the moment, as I see it.*

Semi-structured interview, recruiter Catalina, IT Power, 10/04/2019

This section has focused on how English skills become part of the online application process as a parameter that defines how CVs are screened automatically. Its role in such cases is not that of a requirement that reflects a need for English on the job, but rather that of an effective screening tool that is employed by recruiters in order to reduce the number of online applications. Screening on the basis of English is followed by further English skills evaluation during the next stages of the selection process.

### **6.3 “More important is the level of English than Spanish”**

In the previous sections of this chapter, I have explored how recruiters raise the English skill criterion for job announcements and job applications in order to manage their clients' expectations. Recruiters need to make sure that the candidates they present to companies are not rejected on the basis of the English requirement, which reflects their role as an intermediary business. In addition, recruiters use English skills as a mechanism of profile selection that reduces the otherwise high volume of incoming applications caused by the excess supply (Granovetter, 1995) of workers due to the labour market conditions in Barcelona and in Spain. Cases like the one in the following extract (Extract 6.8), become a justification for recruiters to screen out job applicants with poorer English.

#### **Extract 6.8**

*MEL: And sometimes they say that “okay if the candidate has English it’s a plus, but it’s not compulsory also”. (...) Honestly, I interpretate that if I found someone that has e:r, maybe Intermediate level of English, e:r, versus basic English, okay it’s not a high level of English but it’s intermediate, so maybe I can prioritize the person*

Semi-structured interview, recruiter Melanie, Spencer Junior, 25/10/2017

However, not all recruiters evaluate English proficiency in the same way. To reiterate that the role of English in screening is linked to the labour market, I turn to a recruiter named Stella at Spencer Elite who manages job posts for high-rank profiles.

### Extract 6.9

STE: Sí que es verdad, yo, y a lo mejor es un error en mi trabajo, pero como trabajo con directivos, cuando un directivo te dice que habla inglés, habla inglés, no es como perfiles más junior que te dicen “sí, hablo inglés” pero luego les preguntas y no. Por tanto, yo, cribar en inglés lo hago muy poco. Sí que es verdad que, por ejemplo, proyectos más tecnológicos donde lo que te piden, ya no es un inglés sino que las personas tengan un nivel a ver, bilingüe aquí en España es muy complicado, pero sí:: e::: muy alto, entonces a lo mejor sí que lo cribamos pero para ver que se pueden entender con personas nativas, con personas de la India, con personas de otros países en el screening no/, pero en general para proyectos así:: directivos yo no suelo cribar, porque cuando un directivo te dice que habla inglés, habla inglés, porque son personas que normalmente en su trabajo ya trabajan día a día en inglés.

### Translation of Extract 6.9

STE: *It is true, and maybe it is a mistake in my job, but as I work with executive directors, when an executive director tells you that he speaks English, he speaks English, it is not like more junior profiles that tell you "yes, I speak English" but then you ask them, and they do not. Therefore, I do very little screening in English. It is true that, for example, in more technological projects where what they ask you for, it is not about English but that the people have a level let's see, bilingual here in Spain is very complicated, but ye::s e::: very high, so maybe we do screen them, but to see that they can understand native speakers, people from India, people from other countries in the screening, right/ but in general for projects like thi::s I do not usually screen executives, because when a manager tells you that they speak English, they speak English, because they are people who normally work in English on a day-to-day basis.*

Semi-structured interview, recruiter Stella, Spencer Elite, 16/10/2018

English skills are important for executive jobs. However, Stella argues that the types of profiles she works with can be trusted, unlike junior candidates who can lie about their English skills. She also makes a judgement that when people reach high rank, it means that they already use English at work, and therefore it is assumed they are good at it. Similarly, recruiter Ivan, the head of Spencer Elite, states that people in high-rank positions do not have to be near-native. This stance delineates a distinction between the kind of worker that is expected to learn and invest in English skills, and the kind that faces it as a condition for access to work. Sharone (2013) pointed out that what it takes to get a job may differ worldwide. This difference may lie in criteria that place more weight in the recruitment processes and in how people perceive and explain their

recruitment experiences. Alfredo from IT Power states that languages present a very important part of a person's profile and they comprise the three elements that affect selection.

### Extract 6.10

ALF: Al final el candidato aporta una experiencia laboral o una experiencia a nivel de formación, la parte de idiomas también, importante (...) Al final un candidato es un conjunto, es una persona, para empezar, y luego un conjunto de experiencias, un conjunto de conocimientos, un conjunto de parte técnica. El idioma es una parte importante. (...) Puede suceder que candidatos que encajan con el puesto, que quizás haya otro candidato que pueda encajar más a nivel técnico, pero si el idioma es un punto indispensable, priorizar alguien con un mejor dominio en este caso del inglés por encima de otro candidato con una parte técnica más fuerte, a nivel de funciones. Y esto es lo que puede suceder, ¿no? (...) Imagina que tenemos tres candidatos: (...) Candidato A: a nivel técnico muy bueno, a nivel de idiomas muy bueno también, pero a nivel personal (...) más flojo. Candidato B: pues a nivel técnico más flojito, a nivel de idiomas muy alto, a nivel personal muy alto. Al final candidato C: pues a nivel técnico muy alto, a nivel de idiomas bajo, pero a nivel personal (...) bueno. Pues, depende de la posición priorizarás unos aspectos u otros. Si el idioma es imprescindible... pues tendrás candidato A y candidato B. Y te quedarás con el candidato B porque a nivel personal te habrá encajado mucho más. O puede pasar que, si el idioma no es un requisito imprescindible, a la hora de elegir entre dos, te puedas quedar con uno, el que mejor parte técnica presente. Al final es una valoración de todo. De la parte técnica, de la parte de idiomas, de la parte personal. Pero si el idioma es un requisito indispensable, y tú has de estar hablando en tu día a día en inglés con una persona que está en Asia, si no tienes inglés, pues no vas a poder hacerlo, por lo tanto quedas descartado.

### Translation of Extract 6.10

ALF: *At the end of the day, the candidate brings work experience or training experience, the language part is also important (...) At the end of the day, a candidate is a bundle, a person, to begin with, and then a set of experiences, a set of knowledge, a set of technical aspects. Language is an important part. (...) It may happen that candidates who fit the position, that perhaps there is another candidate who may fit better on a technical level, but if language is an indispensable point, you prioritize someone with a better command in this case of English over another candidate with a stronger technical part, on a functional level. And this is what can happen, isn't it? (...) Imagine we have three candidates: (...) Candidate A: at a technical level very good, at a language level very good too, but at a personal level (...) weaker. Candidate B: at a weaker technical level, at a very high language level, at a very high personal level. In the end, candidate C: at a very high technical level, at a low language level, but at a personal level (...) good. Well, depending on the position, you will prioritize some aspects or others. If language is essential... then you will have candidate A and candidate B. And you will keep candidate B because on a personal level it will have fitted you much better. Or it may happen that, if language is not an essential requirement, when it comes to choosing between two candidates, you may choose the one with the better technical side. In the end, it is an assessment of everything. The technical part, the language part, the personal part. But if language is an essential requirement, and you have to speak English on a daily basis*

*with a person who is in Asia, if you do not have English, you will not be able to do it, so you are discarded.*

Semi-structured interview, recruiter Alfredo, IT Power, 18/09/2018

According to Alfredo, candidates are evaluated on the basis of three criteria: their technical qualifications, languages, and their personality. It is interesting how language is identified as distinct from the technical skills, which are hard skills, and from personality, which is soft skills. While the recruiter does not mention the hard and soft skills paradigm, he does refer to both soft and hard aspects of a candidate profile. The fact that language is presented as a separate category, points to how much weight is put on language skills, namely English, in selection. This weight is felt in every single activity that recruiters undertake.

At Spencer and IT Power, dozens of recruiters routinely ask candidates about their English skills. It is impossible to listen in on every conversation, but sometimes it is possible to hear recruiters say “it’s more the English than the Spanish, hehe” (recruiter Alfredo, IT Power, 05/06/2019). This phrase was uttered by Alfredo while speaking to a candidate from South Africa, who was applying for a job at a multinational company. The candidate had concerns about the Spanish requirement. A nearly identical message was sent by Catalina to a candidate applying for a position at “Smart Things”. The way recruiters explain the importance of English skills to candidates reflects what is written in labour market reports such as those produced by companies like Spencer. It also reflects companies’ understanding of the role that English plays at work (Figure 5.1, Section 5.1).

**Image 6.6**  
Email Correspondence

Gracias por su contacto.  
Que nivel de Castellano es necesario para esta oferta?  
Estoy interesado en saber un poco mas de la oferta de trabajo  
Gracias

Gracias por tu respuesta. Es más importante el nivel de inglés que de castellano. Si resulta de tu interés, puedes facilitarme tu disponibilidad para llamarte y te detallo el proyecto 😊

Saludos,

**Translation of Image 6.6**

*Thanks for getting in touch. What level of Spanish is necessary in this offer? I am interested in knowing a bit more about the job offer.*  
*Thanks*

*Thanks for your response. It is more important the level of English than Spanish. If this interests you, you can let me know your availability to call you and I'll give you details about the project.*  
*Regards,*

Email correspondence between a Portuguese candidate and recruiter Catalina, IT Power,  
10/04/2019

Immense efforts are undertaken by recruiters to gather information on the English skills of all candidates, not just those who are applying for positions with an English requirement. Fabien at IT Power noted that even though he does not always ask all candidates about their English, it is considered good practice. He admits that he should start doing so more often, as he might need this information in the future. Alfredo, also at IT Power, asks candidates about their English skills on the phone, for positions where it is not required at all, before he invites them to interview. After an interview for an engineering position, he says that he did not switch into English during the interview with the candidate because English is not a requirement. However, he did mention that the candidate speaks English with his friends, which he must have learned during the phone screening, as that information was not part of the conversation that took place at the interview.

### Extract 6.11

- ALF: Y el inglés aquí tampoco le he hecho una entrevista en inglés y le he empezado a preguntar porque realmente no lo necesitamos. Va a estar con documentación, nos ha dicho que hablaba con amigos en inglés (...) y que más o menos, así que tampoco.
- RES: pero esto lo hablaste por teléfono
- ALF: esto lo hablé por teléfono también, el primer día.
- RES: porque lo preguntaste sobre el inglés ¿no?
- ALF: uhuh, por teléfono sí. Pero ves que no he empezado hablar con él en inglés, ni le he hecho preguntas, porque al final no hacía falta.

### Translation of Extract 6.11

- ALF: *And I haven't interviewed him in English either, and I started asking because we do not really need it. He is going to be with documentation, he told me that he was talking to friends in English, (...) so more or less, so it is ok.*
- RES: *but you talked about this on the phone*
- ALF: *I talked about it on the phone as well, the first day*
- RES: *because you asked about English, didn't you?*
- ALF: *uhuh, on the phone yes. But you see I didn't start talking with him in English, and I haven't asked questions, because it was not necessary.*

Short post-interview conversation, recruiter Alfredo, 01/04/2019

Recruiters may ask candidates about English skills for data collection purposes when they do the initial phone screening, but later, as happened in the above mentioned case, English is not checked. At the interviews where English is clearly not a job requirement, recruiters claim that they nevertheless “gather information” about candidates’ English. At the following interview (Extract 6.12), Alfredo explains that there is a chance the candidate will use English, but that at the interview he only checked it for informational purposes.

### Extract 6.12

- ALF: Puede ser, dentro oye, dentro igual, sí que se utiliza para hablar con algún departamento específico o con algún proveedor, o con quien sea. En principio e::, no es un requisito. Vale, o sea el tema de requisito no lo es, pero bueno, al final, también nos sirve a nosotros un poquito pues para conocer ¿no? más que nada.

### Translation of Extract 6.12

- ALF: *It can be, inside, listen, inside anyway, it is used to talk to a specific department or a specific supplier, or whoever. In principle e:: it is not a requirement. Ok, I mean it is not a requirement, but in the end, it has also been useful for us to know it, right? more than anything.*

While the practice of routine checks of candidates' English skills *is* linked to recruiters' need to gather this information, there is also an underlying assumption that any candidate with English is better than one without. The message conveyed to all of the candidates who inquire into various positions daily, and who are routinely asked to switch to English on the phone, is that English skills are *required* for access to work.

This section has looked at the interplay of English skills and other profile features that define what it takes to get a job in Spain. I have argued that English skills are given a lot of weight in the overall evaluation of candidates' profiles. Also, because recruiters routinely screen people on the basis of English and gather information about candidates' English proficiency that they then store in their database, the message that goes out is that English skills play an important part in getting a job.

#### **6.4 Evaluation of English skills during phone-screening and job interviews**

This section focuses on recruiters as people who carry out English skills evaluation. I also look into the next stages of the selection process, namely phone screening and job interviews with regards to English skills assessment.

Recruiters are people who evaluate professional skills, including English skills, for fields about which they do not have expert knowledge. Typically, recruiters have a university degree in Psychology, which is an industry standard. When they start recruiting for a given sector, they learn about the skills needed for that sector. The training internships they undertake and their subsequent recruitment experience provide them with a clear definition of the tasks workers of certain professions must carry out. Recruitment agencies do hire people from other degrees, such as Hugo at Spencer Senior, who is a lawyer. These recruiters specialize in the sectors related to their university training, hence they have expert knowledge of the field for which they hire.

A small number of recruiters have an advanced level of English, while most recruiters have an intermediate level. At Spencer, only the recruiters who work on outsourced IT projects, such as the project for the British Shared Service centre, were required to have an advanced level of English. It is assumed that these recruiters might need to carry out interviews entirely in English. Similarly, at IT Power, only the recruiters who worked on

retainer for “Smart Things” had an advanced knowledge of English. Alfredo had completed an internship at Spencer and had wanted to work for their IT Outsourcing Division, but as his English was only at an intermediate level, he did not meet the requirements. Stella from Spencer Elite pointed out that although those who have better English skills *may* manage more international projects, in reality, her English is not great and she manages international projects anyway. International projects refer to work with foreign clients or candidates.

### Extract 6.13

STE: Sí, a ver, sí que es verdad que por ejemplo e::, hay un tipo de perfil que sería un implant, que son personas que trabajan in-house en el cliente, vale, sí que es cierto que hay algunos proyectos de estos donde se requiere un nivel de inglés (...) muy, muy alto, pero en general aquí, sí que es verdad que hay personas que hablan mucho mejor y por tanto pues pueden captar, pueden llevar cuentas más internacionales. Pero yo por ejemplo en mi caso no tengo un alto nivel de inglés, y estoy llevando cuentas internacionales. También hay un punto de qué herramientas tienes tú para desenvolverte ¿no?, pues yo por ejemplo sé que me cuesta más pues si tengo una call, me la preparo más. O si tengo que hacer un mail, intento que alguien me lo valide también, ¿no? hacer más trabajo en el equipo. Hay personas que tienen un muy buen nivel de inglés, y serán más autónomas y tendrán menos problemas en eso. Pero no veo gran diferenciación.

### Translation of Extract 6.13

STE: *Yes, let's see, it is true that for example e::, there is a type of profile that would be an implant, which are people who work in-house at the client, well, it is true that there are some of these projects where a very, very high level of English (...) is required, but in general here, it is true that there are people who speak much better and therefore they can get, they can manage more international accounts. But in my case, for example, I do not have a high level of English, and I am handling international accounts. There is also the question of what tools you have to develop right?, because I, for example, know that it is more difficult for me because if I have a call, I prepare it more. Or if I have to do an email, I try to get someone to validate it for me as well, right, more teamwork. There are people who have a very good level of English, and they will be more autonomous and will have fewer problems with that. But I do not see a big difference.*

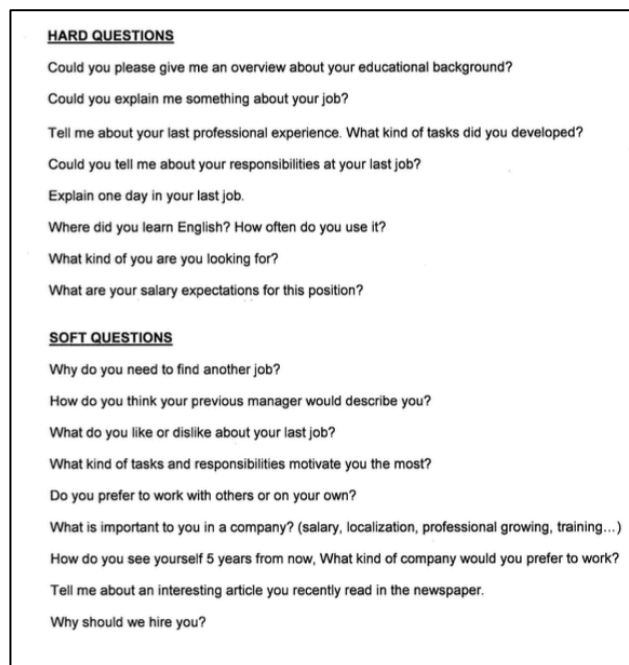
Semi- structured interview, recruiter Stella, Spencer Elite, 16/10/2018

Stella states that she does not see a big difference, professionally speaking, between her and the people who have a much better level of English. However, when she and others have to work on documents in English, they face difficulties. Such activities become a collaborative effort. I witnessed how recruiters help each other translate job descriptions into English that end up containing a lot of mistakes.



English skills evaluation is carried out by means of short oral conversations in English via phone or at interviews. The department document below (Image 6.7), obtained at Spencer Junior, represents the whole set of questions recruiters ask during interviews. Recruiters may choose to switch to English at any moment, typically asking the candidate for permission to have a short conversation in English. That is why all the interview questions are in English. This document is the only guideline for English assessment found at both firms. It contains a number of serious mistakes.

**Image 6.7**  
Interview Questions in English



Spencer Junior, 09/05/2017

The questions in Image 6.7 are split into questions about candidate's hard skills and soft skills, in accordance with the soft/hard skills paradigm. The questions about English are placed in the hard skills section, which means that English is understood by the agency as a technical skill. The questions about English knowledge reflect the competence-based interview approach, where the recruiter intends to find out how the candidate will be able to apply English knowledge at work (Roberts, 2021). Recruiters do not prepare the questions they are going to ask beforehand. They follow the natural course of the interview, and the switch to English is often spontaneous. This is evident

from how they struggle to formulate questions in English, and how often they make mistakes, even though the range of questions they ask is limited. The spontaneity of the English conversations, the varied time of each conversation, the different questions they ask different candidates—these all make the evaluation of English both very informal and highly subjective, which has tangible consequences for candidates and their chances of securing the job. Alfredo at IT Power acknowledged that recruiters' evaluation of the candidates' English skills is subjective. He and some other recruiters are also quite self-critical about their English. They made explicit comments about it in our conversations. Self-reflexivity helps recruiters to make judgments about candidates' skill level as they compare their own knowledge of English to that of the candidates. According to Roberts (2021), Roberts and Campbell (2006), assessment of a language competence should be understood as a joint production. The recruiter's ability to produce questions that elicit adequate responses is as important as the subsequent evaluation of these responses. In the following extract (6.14), the way recruiter Maribel formulates the question leads to a misunderstanding between her and the candidate.

#### Extract 6.14

- MAR: A:nd (..) which disponibility do you have tooo (..) start in a new company.  
CAN: immediately.  
MAR: immediately (..) Okay? And do you have drive license?  
CAN: err, sorry?  
MAR: do\ you\ have\ drive\ license?  
CAN: ah, drive license, yes I have drive license, I have xx  
MAR: okay? Perfect. A::nd, do you so:me geographical disponibility? Like I don't know e:r Barcelona or e::rr

Interview observation, recruiter Maribel, Spencer Junior, 26/10/2017

It has been pointed out by some authors (Brown and Hesketh, 2004) that both formal and informal methods of testing knowledge in recruitment may result in inequalities in the form of hiring outcomes. In the case of short, informal evaluations of English, which assess the ability of a candidate to communicate verbally, we should question the use of a communication format that does not necessarily reflect the competence that is required in order to carry out specific job functions in English. In this circumstance, the lack of communicative ability may be interpreted by recruiters as incompetence (Allan, 2013).

Written tests are another way of testing candidates' English ability. They are sometimes mentioned in the interviews, but they are rarely given to candidates. Recruitment agencies purchase tests that resemble IELTS or TOEFL evaluations from external firms who make business out of these tests. Recruiters also point out that it is the recruiter's judgement of the candidate's oral English skill that has more weight for the client, even if such written tests are assigned. Computer-based tests are also used in order to check candidates' personalities (see example of such test in *Appendix E*). These are also rarely assigned, and, likewise, they do not seem to carry extra weight in the selection process. However, recruitment agencies position themselves as legitimate institutions that have the tools and authority to measure candidates' abilities and personalities.

*Phone screening* refers to a short interview on the phone that recruiters do to verify that job applicants meet the main job requirements, such as work experience and language skills. This type of interview is called an acid test. The principles of the English assessment on the phone are similar to those of the interview, but the phone screening is shorter. The key goal of the phone screenings is to get the job applicant to switch to English and listen to how they speak. For some recruiters, whether a person switches to English on the phone is indicative of having a sufficient level and of the fact that they are not lying about their English. If they are lying, however, they will reject switching to English by providing excuses.

### Extract 6.15

- MEL: Okay, so if I check it by phone and by phone is not good, then I do not invite the person in person in the office. If I check it and her level of English it's ok, then I invite the person to the personal interview with me and then I can check it before, e:r sorry, I can check it again, and normally in my position I do role play
- RES: and how do you check the level on the phone, how, what is the indicator of a good level or of a sufficient level for you?
- MEL: yes, honestly, It's to be fluent. I mean that sometimes even me, I do mistakes, but the most important thing I think to have a good level of English is to be fluent. And for me it's important to be fluent, and maybe you can do some mistakes, but I think that the most important is to have this fluency. (...) Sometimes the candidates, if they do speak well, they switch then, they switch themselves (..)
- RES: automatically
- MEL: automatically and they start speaking to me in English. Others says "oh, it's fine, I have a good level, if you want we can talk" Or err, sometimes happen that the person says "oh,

sorry, I do not have a good level”, so I say “are you, would you be able to do a role-play in English?” and they say, sometimes they say “no”

Semi-structured interview, recruiter Melanie, Spencer Junior, 25/10/2017

Melanie, at Spencer Junior, pointed out (Extract 6.15) that fluency is what she is most interested in on the phone. In addition to making observations about the quality of job applicants’ productive competence, recruiters like Melanie also ask job applicants direct questions about their language ability. Melanie’s key question is about role-play, which she always does at interviews, since she hires for the Retail Sector.

Angel, who hires for the global hub, and therefore requires an advanced level of English, stated that he simply starts talking to job applicants in English on the phone. For him, the way to determine if job applicants are eligible is to see whether they understand him.

#### **Extract 6.16**

ANG: Well, usually because for me, mm, it’s a good questions because always I was thinking about why if they are good or not because maybe they are nervous, but usually it’s because they can understand me. And after that also because sometimes the CVs are not in English, and they are for example in Spanish, and so when they are in Spanish, and also because sometimes they qualify themselves as intermediate. So, when they qualify themselves as intermediate I prefer to call them in English, like mandatory (...) or I check with different questions about also professional speaking like “explain me your CV”, and after that also from the personal point of view like asking things that maybe he can er, I don’t know, predict. So my I would say I reject the candidates regarding English topic, when they can’t answer my questions, and when you can feel that they are (..)

RES: Struggling

ANG: exactly.

Semi-structured interview, recruiter Angel, Tasty Co, 06/11/2018

Fabien tends to ask people personal questions that they do not expect, as he believes it is much easier to talk about one’s professional role. According to Fabien, candidates might prepare to speak about their jobs for interviews, which is why he prefers to ask random questions that are not work-related. Fabien believes that the job applicants who can respond well to random questions have good English skills.

### Extract 6.17

FAB: Bueno, yo obviamente, lo que hago es llamarle y hablamos un poco y chequeo siempre una pregunta muy aleatoria y que no pueda tener preparada, muy tonta, porque yo puedo asumir que una persona pueda estudiar su trayectoria profesional en inglés, pero a mí me gusta preguntar preguntas muy tontas, por ejemplo ¿qué vas a hacer las siguientes vacaciones? ¿vale? O algo, una pregunta ...

### Translation of Extract 6.17

FAB: *Well, I obviously, what I do is to call them and we talk a little and I check always one very random question and that cannot be prepared, very silly, because I can assume that a person can study one's professional trajectory in English, but I like to ask very silly questions, for example what are you going to do during the next vacation? Ok? Or something, a question ...*

Short conversation, recruiter Fabien, IT Power, 10/04/2019

Interestingly, the same method of phone evaluation is adopted for all the required English levels, be it technical English for engineers who are only supposed to work with documentation, English for answering emails or listening in on conferences held at company headquarters, or the highest level of English required for executive profiles who have to negotiate on an international level. The outcome of these evaluations is always based on whether the recruiter thinks the job-seeker can speak well and whether they can keep up with a conversation in English. The faster the candidate speaks and the more things he or she manages to say, the more chances he or she has to demonstrate a sufficient level. Grammatical errors do not matter for recruiters.

*Interviews* are spaces where the main evaluation of English skills takes place. The results of this evaluation are reported to the client. It is true that the candidates who are generally better communicators or who can demonstrate that they are fluent, make a better impression on the recruiter. And, according to Pájaro (2018), an interview is a game of impressions. The easiest way to understand a candidate's English skill level is to ask them directly what aspect of language they are more comfortable with:

### Extract 6.18

CAR: Ok, \*\*Charlotte, can you explain me now what kind of job are you looking for?

CHA: I'm interesting in something like HR consultant or HR department, I would like to change sector, to have a new training.

CAR: do you prefer to work in a small or multinational company? IT's depending?

CHA: it's not important for me.  
CAR: would you like to use English at work? To Improve?  
CHA: I will need a training, to take classes another time, every day, maybe I am not sure now, but  
CAR: ok, it's better for you to write or to speak?  
CHA: maybe writing because you can prepare it.  
CAR: are you in any recruiting process now with other companies.  
CHA: I am participating now in another process, but I don't have the news, I don't know where is the situation.

Interview observation, recruiter Carla, Spencer Junior, 13/11/2017

These types of direct questions about writing and speaking abilities are indicative of candidate's level for recruiters. This particular candidate is encouraged to improve her English skills and to prepare better, in case she is called in for an interview with the client. In the recruiter's view, she lacks fluency. The candidate was sent to the next interview with the manager of a German automotive company; however, she was rejected.

Several authors (Pájaro, 2018; Codó, 2021) problematize fluency as a concept that is vague and argue that comparing candidates in terms of fluency may be problematic. "Fluency" is most often equated with at least a B2 level. However, each recruiter understands the correspondence between fluency and different levels differently. Recruiters tend to ask candidates about their proficiency level, about language-learning trajectories, and whether candidates use English at work or with friends. Through these inquiries, they are checking candidates' communicative ability. If the candidates are "fluent" in a recruiter's opinion, then proficiency levels do not matter. If they are "not fluent" according to the recruiter, then proficiency levels are likewise irrelevant. Most candidates do not have a B2 speaking level, and although they may have a B2 certificate in English, they struggle to express themselves clearly. In fact, the observable language skills gap, discussed in Chapter 5, also applies to recruiters' understanding and expectation that the candidates applying to jobs should be fluent. For recruiters, fluency stands for what is considered "good English" (Lorente, 2017). It is both a predictor (Viswesvaran and Ones, 2010) and indicator of a candidate fit.

Catalina is hiring for the position of Supply Manager at the multinational company, "Smart Things", which has all their design and engineering offices in Barcelona, although their production is based in Asia. The language requirement for this position is advanced English for all company employees. At the interview, the English requirement is

explained in terms of the company structure rather than the specific job position the candidate is applying for.

### Extract 6.19

- CAT: Vale, si te parece te hago un par de preguntitas, una preguntita en inglés para validar el idioma porque sí que es verdad que ellos, uno de los requisitos es el inglés. Vale, mucho contacto, al final con el equipo pues hay gente nativa ingle::sa/, proveedores mercado de ese tipo, el contacto es en inglés/, y bueno, validamos el nivel un poquito. ¿vale? No sé, preguntarte, for example ...<sup>7</sup> why are you interested in this kind of project?
- CAN: interesting, ehh, actually I need to find e:r, other, other objective in my profile, right now I stay for two years in this plant. For me it is enough in automation\ (.) in this plant/. I would like to know about the \*\*Smart Things plants, all, all procedures in plant. E:m I would like to know e:r new skills for the \*\*tech, \*\*tech/
- CAT: \*\*tech, ok. What kind of skills?
- CAN: for example, methodology for for for develop, for develop some tasks in the supply chain area (.) for example (.) for me, emm, (.) I think, I forget, I would like to stay in \*\*Smart Things, for my, for my profile is, for me is, I, I, I will improve my knowledge in the xxx
- CAT: ok, can you explain my an example for, ah, maybe, or, I don't know, a task that you do in your day a day in \*\*Tech world?
- CAN: okay, my day, my task are early in the morning, I get to my work, and everyday I need to I need to do a request for some task in the in the maintenance paint. I need to review the scoopy, the scoopy is a software, like scalar software, and I need to see, no, I see a:ll breakdowns in the last (.) turn, turn, I don't remember. And I need to inform about this, this is my first step in the plant. After this, I have some meetings in my calendar/ for the, for the scoop project, and right/ now I was I was doing, UAT, UAT is a test for the scoop project, the test for example in my area, emm, about SSP for maintenance, for example, create of material... , delay of material, inventory.. yeah
- CAT: (...) which volume of bill of materials do you have do you use to work?
- CAN: what?
- CAT: hehehe, er (.) if I say "bill of material" do you know what is? Bill of materials, how is your bill of materials\ in your job\
- CAN: bill of/
- CAT: bill/ of materials\, booms, listado de materiales/, sí. ¿Habías escuchado alguna vez la palabra "bill of materials"?<sup>8</sup>
- CAN: hmm, como scrap? no?<sup>9</sup>
- CAT: bill es lista, quiere decir listado de materiales. Ellos en \*\*Smart Things utilizan mucho la palabra booms, que es su listado de materiales. O sea, al final tienen un Excel, con un listado de materiales, a lo mejor trabajan con dos mil o tres mil referencias, entonces te preguntaba

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<sup>7</sup> CAT: *Ok, if you don't mind I'll ask you a couple questions, a question in English to validate the language, because it's true that they, one of the requirements is English. Ok, a lot of contact, eventually with the team well there are native E::nglish/ people, providers market of this kind, the contact is in English/, and well, we validate the level a little bit. Ok? I don't know what to ask you, for example ...*

<sup>8</sup> CAT: *list of materials/, yes. Have you ever heard the word "bill of materials"?*

<sup>9</sup> CAN: *hmm, like scrap? Right?*

un poquito cuál es tu listado, con qué volumen de materiales, de listados de materiales sueles trabajar.<sup>10</sup>

CAN: ok. ¿te lo digo en inglés? ¿sí?<sup>11</sup> For me is, is spare parts! for maintenance, this is my, my bill of materials. But every week in the Wednesday, there are some interview in the plants, for maintenance, and there are specific lists for spare parts. Is the break of breakdowns in the week. For example, there are some breakdown for example on Monday/ (.) when the technical person have the interview for case line, there are a list of spare parts, for example, for the robotic parts, for the mechanical parts, the hydraulic parts.

CAT: how much? Maybe?

CAN: how much? It depends but this, for example, for the LED of robotics in the plant, maybe..., one hundred piece!, but specific piece, for example toricas, is like when you have, you need to join two parts, you need a torica for, for, yeah? Emm

CAT: muy bien, el inglés lo podemos dejar aquí.<sup>12</sup>

Interview observation, recruiter Catalina, IT Power, 10/04/2019

At the interview, Catalina asks the candidate about the bill of materials, an important term that the client firm uses. The candidate struggles to understand what it is because the terminology at his firm is different. After the interview Catalina, makes a comment that this candidate's English skill level is not sufficient as he lacks fluency. She also gives a negative evaluation of the candidate's knowledge of industry-specific terms that are important for her client.

### Extract 6.20

CAT: Pues un ejemplo sería este, la fluidez, necesito alguien con más fluidez, o sea que yo me vea pequeña, hablando en inglés, porque yo aquí me veía como grande, y no tengo un buen nivel. Entonces yo necesito a alguien con fluidez y con vocabulario técnico. Procurement, sales, customers, bill of materials, volumes, costs, timings, palabras claves que que a lo mejor a este chico no le salían.

### Translation of Extract 6.20

CAT: *Well an example would be this, fluency, I need somebody with more fluency, so that I see myself small, talking in English, because here I saw myself like big, and I don't have a good level. Then I need somebody fluent and with technical vocabulary. Procurement, sales, customer, bill of materials, volumes, costs, timings, key words that that maybe this boy didn't come with.*

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<sup>10</sup> CAT: *bill is list, it means list of materials. They in \*\*Smart Things use the word boom a lot, which is their list of materials. Well, in the end they have an Excel, with a list of materials, maybe they work with two or three thousand references, so I was asking a little bit what is your list, with which volume of materials, of lists of materials you are used to working.*

<sup>11</sup> CAN: *ok, do I tell you in English? yes?*

<sup>12</sup> CAT: *very well, we can leave English here.*



Short post-interview conversation, recruiter Catalina, IT Power, 10/04/2019

Recruiter Catalina compares her own English skills with those of the candidate. The articulation of candidate's level is done through the perception of her own level as superior to that of the interviewee, whereas in her view, she should perceive his language ability as superior to her own. Further on, Catalina describes this candidate's level as rusty. She sympathizes with the candidate who, she believes, could certainly improve his English, but she emphasizes the company's strict rule not to accept candidates without an advanced level. This example reflects companies' overall approach to hiring, which is defined by their unwillingness to train new employees (Cappelli, 2012).

#### **Extract 6.21**

CAT: O sea, \*\*Smart Things, el 90% de posiciones tienen que saber inglés, un inglés avanzado. Yo pienso que este chico a lo mejor lo tiene un poco oxidado y que cuando llevara un tiempo tendría más soltura, ¿no? más fluidez. Pero no\ (. ) esperan, o no dan esta oportunidad. Necesitan alguien con un inglés avanzado.

#### **Translation of Extract 6.21**

CAT: *Well, \*\*Smart Things, 90% of positions must know English, an advanced English. I think this boy maybe has it a bit rusty and after some time he would have more fluency, right? More fluency. But no\ they do not\ (. ) wait, or they do not give this opportunity. They need someone with an advanced English.*

Short post-interview conversation, recruiter Catalina, IT Power, 10/04/2019

The four requisites for this position are engineering, knowledge of Excel, experience with "booms", and a high level of English. The candidate matches all these requirements but he does not meet the English requirement and is therefore ineligible for this job post. Catalina decides to present the candidate to the client anyway, with a comment that he is missing one of the requirements.

#### **Extract 6.22**

CAT: Yo pienso que este chico se queda corto en el nivel de inglés, como puesto cumple todos los requisitos, tiene un buen manejo, o sea, ellos al final es, que sea ingeniero, que tenga un buen uso de Excel, que haya trabajado con booms, con listado de materiales, con el bill of materials, y con muchos materiales, y que tenga un buen nivel de inglés. Son los cuatro

requisitos para entrar en esta oposición, que tenga más o menos años de experiencia, máster o no, ehh o haya trabajado con ... es indiferente. Pero si a mí la persona me cumple estos cuatro requisitos está dentro, y este chico en inglés cruje.

### **Translation of Extract 6.22**

*CAT: I think that this guy does not have enough English level, as a post he fulfils all the requirements, he has good handling, well, they at the end, that he is an engineer, that he uses Excel well, that he has worked with booms, with list of materials, with the bill of materials, and with many materials, and that he has a good level of English. There are four requirements for this position, that he has more or less years of experience, a master or not, ehh or he has worked with ... it does not matter. But if for me this person fulfils these four requirements, he is inside, and this guy flunks in English.*

Short post-interview conversation, recruiter Catalina, IT Power, 10/04/2019

Another recruiter Maribel, at Spencer Junior, comments on a candidate who, she explains, is lacking vocabulary and argumentation (Extract 6.23). She states that if his speech was better, it would be a point in his favour. The candidate is applying for a position as Micro IT Technician. On his CV, he mentions having a certified B2 in English. The recruiter comments that although the candidate does have the B2 certificate, he does not have the necessary spoken level. Therefore, the overall evaluation of this candidate's English competence is negative. Maribel predicts that if this candidate did go on to the next interview, she would have a hard time convincing the client that he is a good fit; she would need to emphasize the other positive aspects of his profile.

### **Extract 6.23**

*MAR: No tiene gran vocabulario. No puede tener grandes argumentaciones en inglés. No es un candidato para no presentar, pero no tiene un gran nivel de inglés que sea un gran punto a favor de su candidatura.*

### **Translation of Extract 6.23**

*MAR: He does not have much vocabulary. He cannot make big argumentations in English. He is not a candidate not to present, but he does not have a high level of English that would be a big point in favour of his candidacy.*

Short post-interview conversation, recruiter Maribel, Spencer Junior, 30/10/2017

Candidates' fluency and ability to speak are checked even for positions in which candidates only need English to read documents. Alfredo defines the requirement for

the following position as technical English, which is stated in the following job description.

**Image 6.8**  
Job Description

Projectista mecanic \*\*DM per desenvolupar maquinaria/utills 3D per diferents sectors; automocio, pharma, packaging cosmetic etc.... Donan't suport als projectes leaders dels projectes  
Realització de 3D i 2 D com també de documentació tècnica  
Formar part de l'equip d'enginyeria mecanica per donar suport als diferents project leaders mecanics per desnvolupar útils/maquinaria/linias de maquina per diferents sectors  
Formación de FP  
Angles Tècnic  
Requisito \*\*DM  
Anys experiència mínima: 2-4

**Translation of Image 6.8**

*Mechanical designer \*\*DM to develop 3D machinery/tools for different sectors; automotive, pharma, cosmetic packaging etc. .... They support the project leaders of the projects.  
Making of 3D and 2D as well as technical documentation.  
Be part of the mechanical engineering team to support the different mechanical project leaders to develop tools/machinery/machine lines for different sectors.  
Vocational training  
Technical English.  
\*\*DM requirement  
Minimum years of experience: 2-4*

Job description for a position of a Mechanical Engineer, IT Power, 01/04/2019

During the post-interview conversation, Alfredo comments on the English requirement and on the candidate's skill level. The type of company Alfredo is hiring for serves as justification for the language requirement, which is in fact inflated. The client has requested a B1 level, however, it is the candidate's speaking ability that is being evaluated. Alfredo considers a B1 as not being "super fluent", but the candidate still needs to demonstrate communicative competence. There is an explicit statement that if a candidate does not speak English, he would not be eligible for the position. Alfredo is aware of the company's practice of checking candidates' English skills by means of a fluency test that he does not specify. He needs to make sure the candidates he presents are able to pass that test.

### Extract 6.24

- ALF: Sí, el tema de inglés aquí es que esta empresa tiene proyectos internacionales. ¿Vale? Trabajan pues en Sudamérica, trabajan en Australia, trabajan por Europa, trabajan aquí en España hacen de todo. Entonces e: la persona en este caso no necesita un superinglés de tenerlo superfluido, para hablar con con gente internacional ¿no?, con con con otras personas, pero bueno, sí sí que lo va a necesitar para moverse de día a día, en todo tema de programación. Es como ayer, pues un inglés técnico. Para leer documentación, para leer pues si era algún texto que ha enviado desde Australia, para poderlo entender ¿sabes? (...) si \*\*Julio no hubiese hablado, pues el chico se defendía no hacía muchos fallos, aparte hablaba bastante fluidamente, si el chico no hubiese hablado fluido aquí conmigo, no podíamos haber avanzado.
- RES: uhuh, y por qué por qué por qué, te han dicho así o, por qué va a tener que pasar una prueba de fluencia, de fluency
- ALF: pues por las dos cosas. Uno, porque necesita que la persona tenga un mínimo de conocimiento de inglés, y segundo porque luego le van a hacer la otra prueba. Por las dos cosas, es un requisito inglés aquí en \*\*Comm las personas que entran, han de tener un mínimo un B1 de inglés . Y que sea un B1 real. Que puedan hablar.

### Translation of Extract 6.24

- ALF: *Yes, the topic of English here is that this company has international projects. They work well in South America, they work In Australia, they work in Europe, they work here in Spain they do everything. So e: the person in this case does not need super English to have it superfluent, to talk with international people no, with with with other people but well, yes yes he is going to need it to move around daily in all the topic of programming. It is like yesterday well, a technical English. To read documentation, to read well if there is some text that was sent from Australia, to be able to understand it, you know? (...) If \*\*Julio had not talked, well they guy could get by he did not do a lot of mistakes, apart from this he was talking quite fluently, if this guy had not talked fluently with me, we would not have been able to proceed.*
- RES: *uhuh, and why why why they told you this, and why does he has to pass a test of fluency, of fluency.*
- ALF: *well because of two things. Firstly, because they need that the person has minimum knowledge of English, and secondly because then they will give him another test. For two things, it is a requirement here English in \*\*Comm the people that enter, have to have a minimum of B1 English. And that it would be a real B1. That they can speak.*

Short conversation, recruiter Alfredo, IT Power, 28/03/2019

The time spent at the two recruitment agencies has revealed that the way recruiters understand the English skills competence changes over time. At the beginning of my fieldwork in 2017, recruiters would refer to candidates' international life experience as indicative of a good level of English, and they would ask candidates about it at interviews. In 2019, questions were more about international work experience. Albert, at IT Power, stated that there is a clear difference between studying and working abroad/working on international teams, because work is a more stressful environment.

Therefore, people develop their competence in a way that is more appropriate for what recruiters and firms require. In Albert's understanding, international work experience means that the candidate will be able to cope with work tasks associated with English, no matter what their level is. He uses the phrase "international environment", referring to an international *work* environment, in order to signal to the client that a candidate will be suitable for the position. This is another predictor that insures candidate fit.

### Extract 6.25

- RES: Vale, y entonces cómo los presentas, ¿hablas allí de inglés?  
ALB: el inglés, hay una frase para definir si sabe o no sabe inglés. Que es tener experiencia en entornos internacionales.  
RES: vale, entonces es la key phrase  
ALB: es la key phrase para decir el nivel, entonces te piden qué nivel tienen, y entonces aquí les pueden hacer pasar una prueba, a través a online, y te da pues mira tiene un nivel 15 sobre 20, vale, o un, viene con un certificado B2 o un C1, un certificado como tal. Pero cuando tú dices que una persona tiene experiencia en entornos internacionales, lo que estás diciendo es que sea cual sea el nivel de inglés, se apaña. Se, se espabila y resuelve las situaciones en entornos internacionales. Quiero decir que puede no ser gente de habla inglesa, vale, pueden ser chinos, malasio, indios, o: singaporeños o de Estados Unidos o de Inglaterra o de Francia o donde sea. Que da igual. Que él se espabila. Teniendo un nivel más alto o más bajo. Pero se espabila. Si tú tienes un nivel muy alto y no tienes experiencia en entornos internacionales, no es tan importante como que tengas! experiencia en entornos internacionales.

### Translation of Extract 6.25

- RES: *Ok, so how do you present them, do you speak about English there?*  
ALB: *English, there is a phrase to define whether one knows or doesn't know English. Which is to have experience in international environments.*  
RES: *ok, so the key phrase*  
ALB: *it's the phrase to say the level, so they ask you which level you have, and they here can give them a test, online, and it gives you well look! one has level 15 out of 20 ok, or an, one comes with a B2 or C1 certificate, a certificate as such. But when you say that a person has experience in international environments, what you are saying is that whichever level of English, one manages. One gets one's act together and resolves the situations in international environments. I want to say that one can be not an English speaker, ok, they can be Chinese, Malaysian, Indian, o:r Singaporeans or from the US, or from England, or from France, or wherever, doesn't matter. One gets one's act together. Having a higher or a lower level. But one gets one's act together. If you have a very high level and you don't have international experience, it's not as important as to have international experience.*

Semi-structured interview, recruiter Albert, IT Power, 24/04/2019

This section has looked at recruiters' knowledge of English, their education and the way they structure English skills evaluations via phone and at interviews. Recruiters do

not seem to be very competent in English themselves; however, their professional role obliges them to validate candidates' skills daily. Recruiters are flexible about the time and the moment of the interview during which they check candidate's competence. In line with the competence-based framework (Roberts, 2021), recruiters base their evaluation on both self-reported skill levels and candidates' use of language skills in different life situations. The estimations recruiters make about candidate's skills are based on subjective criteria that may vary among recruiters. However, the common evaluation pattern consists in the framing of the desired English skills competence in terms of communicative ability and fluency. Estimations of fluency are made by means of comparison with recruiters' own English skill level, and the recruiters' impression of candidates' speaking ability. This takes place during short conversations in English produced at the interview, and these estimations are highly subjective. Fluency and communicative competence are the indicators of candidate fit, and they are predictors that clients will consider a candidate a match. Another aspect of candidate profiles that can predict a match is international work experience. While English skills are understood by the agency as a technical skill, in line with the guideline evaluation document obtained at Spencer, it is the communicative ability that serves as a benchmark for English skill competence. Therefore, English skills can also be considered a soft skill, in line with their communicative function and in line with the fact that they represent the type of profile that will be a match for clients. This understanding should be problematized, as language skills are no longer evaluated as technical knowledge that is necessary for the job. Instead, fluency—understood as a valid language skill competence—is the characteristic that fulfils the gatekeeping function in the selection process, as candidates of all professions, even the ones where they do not need to speak, are evaluated on the basis of their communicative ability.

## **6.5 Profiling candidates**

This section looks into how the English skills criterion is linked to Spanish companies' efforts to hire junior workers, thus reducing the important costs that come with hiring more senior and experienced profiles. The three selection processes presented show that English skills, together with several other profile features, such as international

work experience and younger age, comprise the kind of profile that is prioritized in selection processes.

Recruiter Alba, from Spencer Senior, manages the selection process for a Registry Technician at a Catalan pharmaceutical company. A high level of English is stated in the requirement. Alba explains that, typically, companies requiring English skills are thinking about internationalisation. However, this particular company has different motivations. The candidate for this position is Daniela, who is a Doctor of Chemistry. She is 45 and has a long work history in the chemical field, which is of high value in the pharma sector. Daniela currently earns a salary of 38-40 thousand euro a year. Her temporary contract is coming to an end so she is looking for job opportunities. At the interview, Alba, the recruiter, asks Daniela about her English skills.

### Extract 6.26

- ALB: ¿Cuál es tu nivel de inglés en la actualidad?  
CAN: =A ver  
ALB: =¿o el inglés con el que has desarrollado actualmente en el trabajo?  
CAN: yo diría, no no tengo un certificado que te pueda dar, pero diría que tengo el nivel first certificate.  
ALB: Vale  
CAN: mi: nivel escrito es mucho mayor que, que no el oral, porque yo no lo utilizaba mucho entonces  
ALB: te, ¿te importaría hacer un minuto de conversación oral?  
CAN: e:, sí. No perdona, no hahaha (both of them laugh). Me cuesta hablar en castellano, pero hahaha  
ALB: básicamente dado que no es completamente necesario, un requisito muy indispensable para esta vacante, solo hacemos es una pequeña parte para evaluar un poco un fluidez de speech, ¿te parece?  
CAN: sí, sí.

### Translation of Extract 6.26

- ALB: *What is your current level of English?*  
CAN: *=let's see*  
ALB: *=or the English you have currently developed at work?*  
CAN: *I would say, I don't I do not have a certificate that I can give you, but I would say I have a first certificate level.*  
ALB: *Ok*  
CAN: *my written level is much higher than my oral level, because I did not use it much back then.*  
ALB: *would you mind doing a minute of oral conversation?*  
CAN: *e:, yes. No sorry, no hahaha (both of them laugh). It is hard for me to speak in Spanish, but hahaha.*

- ALB: *basically, since it is not completely necessary, a very indispensable requirement for this position, we just do a small part to evaluate a little bit of speech fluency, do you agree?*
- CAN: *yes, yes.*

Interview observation, recruiter Alba, Spencer Senior, 09/10/2018

Daniela self-evaluates her English skills level as B2, however, she admits that her spoken English is not very good because she has not used it on the job. At her job, she mainly works with chemicals and the computer database. As can be seen in Extract 6.26, Daniela jokes that she can barely speak her native language. Both the candidate and the recruiter laugh about it. The truth is that her job does not involve speaking per se. Daniela and Alba have a short conversation in English, by means of which Daniela's communicative ability is checked. The recruiter asks Daniela two questions in English: what she thinks of the position and whether she knows the company. At the end of the interview the recruiter reiterates the question about her opinion of the job, but Daniela is nervous about the English requirement. She asks the recruiter about it. Alba admits that she is a bit concerned about Daniela's English level, but she believes that Daniela has very good chances of getting the job because of her work experience.

### Extract 6.27

- CAN: ¿Y te encaja bien el perfil?
- ALB: =sí. Tu ventaja sobre todo
- CAN: =¿el nivel de inglés?
- ALB: =el nivel de inglés es lo que más temo.
- CAN: =eh
- ALB: =¿vale?
- CAN: =hahaha
- ALB: =el nivel de inglés es lo que más temo. E::m, sí que es verdad que si me exigieran un mayor nivel de inglés, lo más seguro es que te solicite una prueba escrita, un rollo, un estilo writing o algo así que ellos lo pudieran pedir, más a nivel técnico, para demostrar quizás o compensar más la parte de grammar, ¿vale?
- CAN: vale.
- ALB: e::, más enfocado quizás a un business case o una situación que ellos mismos pasen en su día a día. Para que puedan compararlo, vale/
- CAN: uhuh, vale.
- ALB: posiblemente sea un factor que como hay que tener a defender. Entonces, yo voy allí y te lo saco, te saco esta prueba. El nivel de inglés, no tanto, lo que pasa es que tu ventaja es estás experimentada en apis, vale, que al final es lo que más cuesta de encontrar. El candidato de principio activo es muy rifado en el sector.



### Translation of Extract 6.27

- CAN: *And does the profile fit you well?*  
ALB: *=yes. Your advantage above all*  
CAN: *=the level of English?*  
ALB: *=the level of English is what I fear the most.*  
CAN: *=eh*  
ALB: *=ok?*  
CAN: *=hahaha*  
ALB: *=the English level is what I'm most afraid of. E::m, it is true that if I were required to find a higher level of English, I would most probably ask you for a written test, a type of writing or something like that they might ask you for, more on a technical level, to demonstrate perhaps or to compensate more for the grammar part, ok?*  
CAN: *ok.*  
ALB: *e::, more focused perhaps on a business case or a situation that they themselves have in their day-to-day. So that they can compare it, ok/*  
CAN: *uhuh, ok.*  
ALB: *it will just be a factor that you have to defend. So, I will go there and I will take it out, I will take this test. The level of English, not so much, what happens is that your advantage is your experience in APIs, okay, which in the end is what is more difficult to find. The candidate of active principle is very sought after in the sector.*

Interview observation, recruiter Alba, Spencer Senior, 09/10/2018

After the interview, Alba comments on how valuable this candidate is because of her professional qualifications and her work experience with active pharmaceutical substances. At the same time, she explains that the company has requested to hire someone younger to “rejuvenate the staff”, and hence someone with advanced English (Extract 6.28). It is also clear that the candidate does not need English to carry out her duties.

### Extract 6.28

- ALB: *Me comentan que es valorable el nivel de inglés porque quieren refrescar la plantilla, es decir, todas las personas que ellos tienen como son las personas de 45-50 años, no tienen ningún nivel de inglés suficiente. Entonces, el que tiene el nivel de inglés, es el que recibe todas las visitas, hace todas las auditorias con personalidades que son del extranjero, ¿no? E:, en este caso, como es un técnico de registros, buena parte de lo que escribe, ya está en un template que está en inglés, y ella se sabe igualmente utilizarlo en el mismo formato, entonces sólo tienes que saber las palabras técnicas. (...) Me han dicho que sería valorable un nivel de first advanced, pero este nivel no suele xxx. Ella ha dicho “tengo un first”, pero realmente es un B1.2 ¿quizás? ¿no, posiblemente? De hecho yo tengo el mismo nivel que ella. Y creo que podría hacerlo mejor, por ejemplo, por ejemplo. Entonces me refiero que a veces la concepción de qué nivel tiene cada persona es un poco confusa. Pero en su caso estar en registros, no le va a hacer, es que no va a tener que hacer visitas, es que va a estar*

todo el día allí xxx. (...) Pienso que en su posición el inglés lo podría utilizar dos veces en su vida (...) Al final lo que la empresa te está pidiendo, el nivel de inglés es un añadido.

### Translation of Extract 6.28

*ALB: They tell me that the level of English is valuable because they want to renew the staff, that is to say, all the persons that they have are people 45-50 years old, they do not have a sufficient level of English. So, the one who has the level of English is the one who receives all the visits, does all the audits with personalities who are from abroad, right? E; in this case, as she is a Registry Technician, a big part of what she writes, there is already a template that is already in English, and she already knows how to use it the same format, so you only have to know the technical words. (...) I was told that a level of first advanced would be an advantage, but this level is not usually xxx. She said "I have a first", but it's really a B1.2, isn't it? Possibly? In fact I have the same level as her. And I think I could do better, for example. So I mean sometimes the conception of what level each person has is a bit confusing. But in her case being on registry, it is not going to make her, she is not going to have to do visits, she is going to be there all day xxx. (...) I think that in her position she could use English twice in her life (...) In the end what the company is asking you for is an additional level of English.*

Post-interview conversation, recruiter Alba, Spencer Senior, 09/10/2018

This and other similar cases that are found in the data, show that companies request English skills as part of a company rejuvenation strategy. This way, they can justify the hiring of a younger generation of workers. It is also true that younger candidates are cheaper to hire because they do not have the qualifications and seniority characteristic of older workers (Ministerio de Trabajo y Economía Social, 2020). It becomes clear that while companies are willing to add a bit of salary for English skills, they actually save money by establishing the English skills requirement and limiting access to jobs for older, more expensive candidates. Candidates, such as Daniela, who have better work experience can no longer access employment controlled by the English requirement. Recruiter Alba also mentions that Daniela would not be eligible for a position at a multinational company due to her general lack of speaking skills. Such practices exacerbate the work conditions for the older generation of workers, who can no longer seek out contracts with better social protection and the higher salaries that would correspond to their work experience and seniority. Companies instead hire younger workers, under worse conditions. As a result, the existing labour market duality is reproduced (Malo de Molína, 2020).

English is seen as a legitimate reason for companies to select a younger and cheaper profile at the expense of better professional qualifications that firms should value more

than English and young age. Daniela, the candidate discussed above, is given a “legitimate” reason by the recruiter as to why she is not suitable for a job post, which is her lack of fluency. As a result, she is forced to continue working on temporary contract and to keep looking for jobs.

The next case begins as a selection process at IT Power for the position of Scrum Master for an airline company called “Fly With Me”, which is managed by recruiter Elena. English is a job requirement, although the initial job description made no mention of it. A scrum master is a team coach who uses a specific methodology to control the daily routines of IT developers and to ensure that they meet deadlines. Candidate Luis is a Telecommunications Engineer who has worked as a Project Manager and who has international work experience in the US and in the Netherlands. He studied Scrum/Agile methodology in the US when he was there on a work project. This methodology has recently become popular in project management in Spain. After his experience in the US, Luis worked as Project Coordinator for a Spanish/Dutch project, for which he was sent to the Netherlands. He later managed another international project with several European countries out of Spain. At the interview, Luis admitted that his knowledge of English was key to being selected for those projects.

### **Extract 6.29**

**LUI:** IT Project Coordinator, fue uno de los primeros proyectos que hice, era un upgrade de la red de comunicaciones de las tiendas, y estaban buscando pues una persona local que pudiese buscar vendors y poder comunicar con ellos para hacer una selección e implementarlo, porque digamos España cuelga de Holanda pero claro el tema de idioma y tal pues, se apoyaron en mí. Y como tenía un perfil técnico, había, justo acababa de sacarme el título, y hablaba inglés y ya estaba como digamos dentro del equipo dijeron pues vamos a probar hicieron las entrevistas y y para adelante.

### **Translation of Extract 6.29**

**LUI:** *IT Project Coordinator, it was one of the first projects I did, it was an upgrade for the shops' communications network, and they were looking for a local person who could look for vendors and be able to communicate with them to make a selection and implement it, because let's say Spain depends on the Netherlands but of course the language issue and so on, so they relied on me. And as I had a technical profile, I had just finished my degree, and I spoke English and I was like, let's say in the team, they said let's try it out, they did the interviews and and in I go.*

Interview observation, candidate Luis, IT Power, 03/04/2019

At the interview with Luis, Elena explained that English skills were not really needed in the position he applied for. Elena hinted that Luis could participate in some international projects if he'd like, again, invoking the language of possibility observed in other cases, as discussed in the previous chapter.

### **Extract 6.30**

ELE: So in this position \*\*Luis it's not a must, to have a high level of English, but they have also international projects, maybe you can collaborate with them in some other projects, not only in Spanish, but the main language is nowadays isn't Spanish, but I would like to know which would be the position you are looking for and which would be the dream position in this moment.

Interview observation, recruiter Elena, IT Power, 03/04/2019

After the interview, Elena stated she was going to present Luis to the client as a job candidate, but she also admitted that this candidate is far more valuable than what the Scrum Manager position could offer him because of his English skills.

### **Extract 6.31**

ELE: No me lo han pedido pero es algo que se valora. Es decir, como es una empresa internacional, si tienen algún proyecto internacional pues le pueden dar más faena. Pero en principio con el español e:, a mí me encaja pero creo que este chico tiene más aspiraciones que esta posición. Que entre y pueda crecer, sí. Pero bueno, intentaremos buscar otra solución. Dentro de la interna creo que no pagan tanto dinero. Que el salario es mucho más bajo. Igualmente yo lo voy a presentar, luego hable con él, si quiere y tal. Pero este chico es muy buen perfil. Dentro de, y además es project manager en IT. Él es ingeniero de telecomunicaciones. Y además el inglés, yo ahora no tengo proyectos para él pero podemos encontrar algo.

### **Translation of Extract 6.31**

ELE: *They have not asked for it but it is something that is valued. That is to say, as it is an international company, if they have an international project, they can give him more work. But in principle with Spanish e:, he suits me but I think this guy has more aspirations than this position. He can come in and grow, yes. But well, we will try to find another solution. Within the internal I think they do not pay so much money. The salary is much lower. Anyway, I'm going to present him, then I'll talk to him, if he wants to and so on. But this guy is a very good profile. And he is also project manager in IT. He is a telecommunications engineer. And also the English, I don't have any projects for him now but we can find something.*

Short conversation, recruiter Elena, IT Power 03/04/2019

Elena recalled that there was an internal position at IT Power as an IT Operations Manager for the engineering department. This position had been on hold for several months, so Elena decided to talk to the IT Power HR Director and the IT Unit Director to see whether they would be interested in a candidate like Luis. Since that moment, Luis's selection process became a selection process for a position at the IT Power Engineering Department. Elena spoke to the HR Director of IT Power of Luis's virtues, saying that he is nice and young, his English is very high (original: "su inglés es altísimo"), and that he has international work experience in the Netherlands and the US. She mentioned his English skills at least twice in that conversation, along his age and international experience, to try to convince the directors to interview Luis. The Directors liked Luis as they interviewed him. They explained the vision they had for his potential job position if he chose to accept it.

#### Extract 6.32

EVA: Buscamos una persona que tenga esa chispa sí ¿no? vamos a probar nuevas tecnologías y le guste estar a la última, genere esa dinámica también dentro del equipo, nos posicione a los proyectos interesantes, tenga esa ambición de si ahora tenemos proyectos de esa cifra, entonces vayamos a los de millón ¿sabes? Que tenga esa capacidad para crecer y apostar y: no estancarnos porque el objetivo es posicionarnos hacer proyectos y que dé un crecimiento y que haya un impacto de marca (...) y esto es un poco también buscamos que esta persona pues haga un portfolio de proyectos pues que también ayude no y se implique en ampliar este portfolio y tome una parte esta de innovación posicionamiento como referente técnico.

#### Translation of Extract 6.32

EVA: *We are looking for a person who has that spark, yes right? we are going to try new technologies and that he likes state of the art, who also generates that dynamic within the team, and positions us in interesting projects, that has that ambition of, if now we have projects of that figure, then let's go to those of a million you know? That has that ability to grow and commit and not to get stuck because the objective is to position us towards making projects and to provide growth and a brand impact (...) and that a bit we also seek that this person makes a portfolio of projects as well helps, right? and that he is involved in expanding this portfolio and takes part on innovation positioning as the technical reference.*

Interview observation, HR Director Eva, IT Power, 04/04/2019

The Director of the HR Unit has seen in Luis what companies see in younger candidates with international experience and English skills. The staff rejuvenation and cost-saving for companies, which is linked to hiring junior profiles, is related to the image

of the company and their goal of hiring employees that also represent the target market for the products they produce. Younger workers are associated with progress, productivity, innovation, and, as a result, profits. Several times during the two-hour interview, the candidate's English skills and international experience were mentioned in a positive light. The director's comments also alluded to one of the companies' strategies for learning about new profit-making strategies through candidates' lived experiences in other countries.

### **Extract 6.33**

GER: Claramente veo en ti muchas virtudes, muy muy valorables para el puesto, la parte internacional, cómo te expresas claramente, tus skills técnicos en la parte de gestión de proyectos sean muy valorados para mis gestores de proyecto que no están ni mucho menos tan profesionalizados de cómo has llegado a estar tú, porque tú has estado en entorno internacional, que te ha obligado y tu inquietud te ha llevado a formarte, y de alguna manera valoraríamos mucho llevar el caso que pudieras transmitir esta sabiduría al equipo.

### **Translation of Extract 6.33**

GER: *I clearly see in you many virtues, very highly valued for the position, the international part, how you express yourself clearly, your technical skills in the project management part are highly valued for my project managers who are not nearly as professionalized as you have become, because you have been in an international environment, which has forced you to, and your curiosity has led you to develop, and in some way we would highly value the case that you could transmit this wisdom to the team.*

Interview observation, Director of IT Unit Gerard, IT Power, 04/04/2019.

The interview was over shortly after Gerard provided this appreciation of the candidate. I briefly spoke to Gerard and asked him about the selection process for this position and the English requirement. Gerard explained that they would like to hire someone with good English skills because the firm does not have anybody with English. The person chosen would potentially be responsible for 15% of the business for which this skill is useful, which has so far been handled just fine with the available company's resources. Later I found out that Luis was hired by IT Power. He became the IT Operations Manager. The board of directors valued the candidate for a combination of his profile aspects, his youth, his international experience, and his near-native English skills. The near-native English skills served as a trigger for the recruiter to reroute the

selection process. In this case, English skills become an index of a person's profile, a soft skill, as Luis was clearly hired not for his technical knowledge of English.

The next selection process further demonstrates how English can be operationalized by recruiters in order to provide justification for the selection of a younger worker with international experience. At Spencer Junior, recruiter Abigail was hiring for a Commercial Technician position with the following requirement for English skills:

**Image 6.9<sup>13</sup>**  
Job Announcement

**Requisitos mínimos**  
Nivel de inglés alto  
Experiencia previa similar

**Descripción**  
Empresa del sector tecnológico industrial ubicada en [redacted] busca incorporar a un/a Técnico/a Comercial para el Dpto de Sistemas de [redacted]

Buscamos a alguien con formación en Ingeniería o similar.  
Nivel de inglés alto.  
Conocimientos de audio y sonido (valorable)  
Experiencia previa similar (valorable)

**Translation of Image 6.9**

**Minimum requirements**  
High level of English  
Similar previous experience

**Description**  
A company in the industrial technological sector located in \*\* is looking to incorporate a Commercial Technician for the Department of Systems \*\*

We are looking for someone with a training in Engineering or similar  
High level of English  
Audio and Sound knowledge (valued)  
Similar Previous Experience (valued)

Job announcement for a position of a Commercial Technician, Spencer, 24/04/2018

In this job offer, English appears in the primary requirements and in the job description. Two candidates were interviewed for this position. The first candidate has a five-year degree in Engineering and a 4 out of 5 self-evaluation of English skills on his

<sup>13</sup> In order to maintain anonymity, the name of the company and its location in Image 6.9 has been blacked out.

CV. He is from Venezuela and he has lived and worked in Spain for several years. He brings his language certificates to the interview and he tries to show them to the recruiter when she asks him about his level. The candidate is applying for this position because he has a part-time contract.

### Extract 6.34

- ABI: El nivel de inglés a día de hoy, lo tienes alto ¿verdad? ¿Dónde lo has aprendido?<sup>14</sup>  
CAN: en cursos, en el instituto, y me comunico con proveedores en Italia. Hablo con ellos por teléfono, más por email.<sup>15</sup>  
ABI: vamos a hacer una prueba de nivel, explícame sobre tus planes de este fin de semana o del pasado como prefieras tú.<sup>16</sup>  
CAN: I am going to have a dinner with my cousin, and then I am going to be watching TV on the internet and talk to my family in Venezuela  
ABI: which series do you like to watch?  
CAN: Big Bang theory.  
ABI: do you watch it in English or Spanish?  
CAN: in Spanish, in Spanish (laughs)  
ABI: ¿y te gustaría seguir aprendiendo?<sup>17</sup>  
CAN: si, sigo aprendiendo.<sup>18</sup>

Interview observation, recruiter Abigail, Spencer Junior, 24/04/2018

This brief English skills evaluation seems short; however, it is clear from how the candidate speaks that he uses grammatically correct structures. Abigail promises to the candidate that he will be presented to the client. As the interview runs its natural course, the same recruiter decides to eliminate this candidate from the selection process because of his English skills. She says that his English is “very low” (original: “*muy bajito*”) and “they are going to tell me *no*” (original: “*me van a decir que no*”). She justifies this decision by referring to the fact that the firm requires a high level, at minimum a first certificate, which according to her oral evaluation, the candidate does not have. Additionally, she feels sorry for the candidate, but she states that the company is strict with English and that she is sure the candidate would be turned down.

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<sup>14</sup> ABI: *Your level of English today, it is high, right? Where did you learn it?*

<sup>15</sup> CAN: *in courses, at school, and I communicate with providers in Italy. I speak with them by phone, more by email.*

<sup>16</sup> ABI: *let's do a level test, tell me about plans for this weekend or the weekend after, whichever you prefer.*

<sup>17</sup> ABI: *and would you like to keep learning?*

<sup>18</sup> CAN: *yes, I keep learning.*



The second candidate for the same position has inferior education to that of the first candidate, having only completed a professional training course in engineering. He is 20 years old and he has experience in a workshop specializing in the automotive industry and some international experience. He worked on projects for a company in Switzerland, and he travelled to the US and worked there in another workshop for no longer than a year.

### Extract 6.35

- ABI: ¿Qué nivel tienes en inglés?<sup>19</sup>
- CAN: bien, no soy el más fluido del mundo.<sup>20</sup>
- ABI: si me quieres contar qué es lo que estabas haciendo el finde pasado o qué vas a hacer este fin de semana<sup>21</sup>
- CAN: I am a little bit nervous, I am 20 years old, I like sports, I like new people, I would like to talk about the weekend, the sun is starting to shine so I will spend it on the beach, maybe I will go out with my friends to have dinner. It also depends on work a little bit, Let's see, as I told you before I could spend some time on the beach with friends, I don't know if you want to ask me something else.
- ABI: no, ya basta. El trabajo es con la empresa \*\*Cable. Está especializada en sistemas de detección de incendios, es una empresa muy innovadora, están innovando constantemente.<sup>22</sup>
- CAN: ¿a quién venden? <sup>23</sup>
- ABI: a empresas instaladoras, han participado en proyectos internacionales, en la tienda \*\*Car. Buscan incorporar un técnico comercial, alguien que tenga inglés medio-fluido, el tuyo me sobraría, es una empresa que está dispuesta a incorporar un perfil junior. No es trabajo de viajar.<sup>24</sup>

Interview observation, recruiter Abigail, Spencer Junior, 24/04/2018

Although Abigail was consistent with the questions she asked candidates to elaborate on in English, at the second interview, she mentioned that a medium-fluent candidate would be okay for this position. She used the English skills requirement as a justification for rejecting the previous candidate, stating the English is very important

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<sup>19</sup> ABI: *What is your English level?*

<sup>19</sup> CAN: *well, I'm not the most fluent in the world.*

<sup>21</sup> ABI: *if you want to tell me what you were doing last weekend or what you're going to do this weekend*

<sup>22</sup> ABI: *no, that's it. The job is with \*\*Cable company. They specialise in fire detection systems, they are a very innovative company, they are innovating constantly.*

<sup>23</sup> CAN: *who do they sell to?*

<sup>24</sup> ABI: *to installation companies, they have participated in international projects, in \*\*Car shop. They are looking to incorporate a commercial technician, someone who has medium-fluent English, yours would be more than enough, it's a company that is open to hiring a junior profile. The work does not consist in travelling.*

and the client is very strict, but she downplayed it this time. After the interview, Abigail said that she like the second candidate more than the previous one: “I was delighted, I liked him very much, it is a distinct profile” (original: “*a mi me encantó, a mi me ha gustado mucho, es un perfil distinto*”). She mentioned that the candidate was more open and more motivated. When I asked her about English skills of this second candidate, she said: “yes, I liked him” ( original: “*sí, a mi me ha gustado*”). The English level of both candidates was very similar, but clearly, Abigail liked the soft skills of the second candidate more, and as a result, she thought his English was acceptable. The company has mentioned that they would prefer to have a younger worker, and this candidate, despite having a poorer education, was much younger. He also had international work experience.

This case has demonstrated how English skills may be used by recruiters to justify their choice of candidates, which often skews toward younger, less qualified profiles with international experience. Further evidence that the English skills requirement has been paired up with the strategy to hire younger workers can be found in the statistics, elaborated by Observatorio DCH (La Gestion de Talento en España, 2018: 25), that show that in the years 2017 and 2018, between 45% and 48% of all hired workers represented junior profiles. Middle-management positions represented around 30%, and high-rank positions represented around 15% of all people hired. The chart below shows the data on the English skills levels for new job positions.

As it can be observed, in 2017, more than half of the available jobs required an advanced level of English. In 2018, this number started to drop, which can be related to what kinds of jobs were emerging, or to the improving labour market conditions characterized by less unemployment and, hence, looser requirement for English.

**Figure 6.10**  
Level of English Required for New Hirings

## 5. Resultados

### 5.1 Atracción

En el gráfico 6 "Nivel de idioma Inglés requerido en las nuevas contrataciones", las compañías afirman que si lo requieren y en nivel alto C1-C2 (32,35%), en un nivel medio B1-B2 (38,24%), en nivel bajo A1-A2 (6,62%), y no lo consideran imprescindible el 18,38% de los encuestados. Resalta la disminución en un 21,58% respecto a los resultados del año 2017, de las empresas que consideran como requisito para las contrataciones el nivel de idioma inglés C1-C2.

Gráfico 6. ¿Se les requiere idiomas a los jóvenes talento? En caso de un segundo idioma, identificar el nivel requerido.



DCH, 2018

This section explored how English skills can be used as a language requirement in selection processes in order to select a particular kind of profile, and how this criterion justifies why candidates with better qualifications are kept from accessing jobs. The requirement is linked with companies' cost-saving strategies, while the underlying ideology is that they need to rejuvenate staff and need their workers to speak English.

## Chapter 7 Candidates' Recruitment Experiences

This chapter looks at the job candidates' perspective on recruitment and the evaluation of English skills at recruitment agencies. I explore this question by looking at the lived recruitment experiences of candidates in order to examine how they understand the English skills requirement, how they respond to it, and how it impacts their employability and work trajectories.

Changing jobs in the current labour market can be tricky. Qualified professionals over 35 got their last jobs at various national and multinational firms with no strict English requirement before the 2008 crisis. They have not been able to develop English skills on the job or reach a good spoken level. However, they are facing this new English requirement as they are seeking new job opportunities for reasons that include unemployment or temporary employment, changing conditions at their previous workplace, inability to get promoted, or personal reasons (such as poor health).

Candidates' job search experiences lead them to believe that the advanced English skills requirement for open positions is related to the activity of recruitment agencies, which experience high rates of job applications due to high unemployment. The highly qualified professionals are also aware that their technical skills, and the fact that they have not needed a high level of English in order to perform their jobs tasks in the past, make them eligible for the advertised positions. They try to resist the English skills requirement by applying to the jobs where a higher level of English than they have is required. They also sign up for classes at private language academies in order to better the English skills that would technically improve their employability. Hence, they submit to the neoliberal logic and they take full responsibility for self-skilling.

Recruitment journeys of job candidates unveil how fluent English has become a category that is in itself key for gaining access to work. Fluent English speakers get propelled into new jobs and promotions while those who lack fluency are still limited in their careers and have fewer choices of companies where they can get jobs, notwithstanding their individual investment in English. Oral English evaluations at interviews make candidates uncomfortable and cause them a lot of stress. The candidates are faced with a dilemma of how to be honest about their level and at the same time present themselves as competent to do their jobs.

## 7.1 Searching for a new job

In the theoretical framework chapter of this thesis, I discussed how, in the 1980s, businesses reimagined the employer-employee relationship according to their neoliberal short-term profit-making logic. This reimagining has fundamentally changed people's lives as workers (Angouri, 2018; Cappelli, 2009; Gershon, 2017). People's work trajectories now comprise a series of job changes in search of better employment conditions, professional development and self-fulfilment. While finding job opportunities may have become easier, competition for jobs is tight, in part because access to jobs is regulated by recruitment agencies who have established stringent selection criteria that job-seekers have to meet in order to have a chance at a job.

There are many reasons that people seek out new employment, be it simply a better salary or a lack of opportunities for development in their current position. Many people begin looking for a new job while still employed. This is strategically beneficial; recruitment agencies consider candidates who are currently employed to be more attractive (Finlay and Coverdill, 2002) because they can be presented to the client as "scarce talent". In light of the labour market conditions in Barcelona in 2017, with high unemployment and recruitment agency offices "swarming" with CVs, clinging to one's present job while looking for a new one was the only viable option. The highly qualified professionals in different sectors, most of them with a university degree, who began looking for a job, were faced with the English requirement in job announcements and in the selection processes they were going through.

One of the most common reasons for which candidates undertook their job search was overcoming job insecurity. This insecurity came in the form of temporary contracts, or the fear of being laid off as a result of mergers, buy-outs, and company restructuring. Other candidates were seeking a promotion but understood that there were no such possibilities in the company where they were currently employed.

Diego, for example, had been a key account manager at "Best Sauce" for 10 years. His job was to regularly meet with representatives of supermarket chains where his company's product was sold to announce monthly promotions, make sure they were implemented by the supermarkets, and to make an estimation of future sales. Diego covered the regions of Catalonia, Balearic Islands and Andorra. When Diego's firm was sold to a foreign investor, he did not like the new direction the management was taking.

He stopped feeling comfortable in his job because it seemed that all the hard work he had done up to that point was not appreciated. Moreover, the company started to lay off workers. Although Diego points out that he did not think that the company was going to fire him, the general atmosphere at work and the new business approach were the key reason for why he decided he had to look for a new job.

### Extract 7.1

- DIE: La empresa la compró un grupo inversor \*\*extranjero, como hemos hablado, y: bueno, la verdad es que la política que establecieron no me gustaba nada, no me convencía, y: aparte
- RES: ¿qué, qué pasaba con la política?
- DIE: sí, pues bueno, simplemente todo el trabajo que habíamos hecho por ejemplo de reposicionamiento de precios, e: de pactos con los clientes y acuerdos, e: aquello pasó a un segundo plano y simplemente lo que querían era vender cajas, vender cajas, vender cajas, vender cajas, y vender cajas a precio que fuera. Sin ningún sentido, sin, bueno. Luego aparte en ningún momento ellos se comprometían a nada, no, no te ayudaban, no te ayudaban en nada. Simplemente querían que tú les dijese todo lo que tenías, lo que tenían incluso ellos que hacer, e, bueno, empezaban a echar gente, hubo muchos problemas, de hecho conmigo contaban pero bueno, yo la verdad es que no me encontraba a gusto y empecé a moverme para buscar otro, otro trabajo

### Translation of Extract 7.1

- DIE: *The company was bought by a \*\*foreign investment group, as we have discussed, and well, the truth is that I did not like the policy they established, I was not convinced by it, and besides that*
- RES: *what happened with the policy?*
- DIE: *yes, well, simply all the work we had done, for example, on price repositioning, e: on pacts with customers and agreements, e: all that became secondary, and they simply wanted to sell boxes, sell boxes, sell boxes, sell boxes, sell boxes, and sell boxes at whatever price they could. Without any sense, without, well. Then they never committed themselves to anything, no, they did not help, did not help you in any way. They simply wanted you to tell them everything you had, even everything they had to do, and, well, they started to fire people, there were many problems, in fact they counted on me but I, well, the truth is that I did not feel comfortable and I started to move to look for another job.*

Semi-structured interview, candidate Diego, 18/07/2018

Diego applied for a position with the same job title as his own at an American beverage company called “Strong Spirit”. The reason an advanced English level was required, according to the recruiter in charge of his selection process, was that the company was multinational. This fact legitimized the English requirement in the eyes of the recruiter. However, Diego’s job responsibilities clearly did not involve the use of

spoken English. He was applying for a job where he would have to negotiate deals on a regional level. Diego described his English level as basic which meant he did not really have knowledge of English.

### **Extract 7.2**

**DIE:** Inicialmente querían alguien para: sobre todo para la parte Norte de España, Catalunya principalmente, buscaban alguien como, con conocimientos de: pues negociaciones a nivel regional con las cadenas, y también evidentemente al ser una multinacional americana, pues e.; también pedían conocimiento de la lengua inglesa. Suelen pedir e.; un nivel advanced, aunque ahora ya están pidiendo uno superior.

### **Translation of Extract 7.2**

***DIE:** Initially they wanted someone mainly for the northern part of Spain, Catalonia mainly, they were looking for someone like, with knowledge of, well, negotiations at regional level with the chains, and also obviously being an American multinational, well e.; they also asked for knowledge of the English language. They usually ask for e.; an advanced level, although they are now asking for a higher one.*

Semi-structured interview, candidate Diego, 18/07/2018

Charlotte, 38, is a psychologist with a Master's degree who had worked at the human resources department of a renowned private hospital. She was an HR technician, specializing in labour risk prevention. This job was her fifth workplace. She had been employed at this company for seven years while she had worked in all the previous companies for a maximum of two years with poor salary conditions and temporary contracts. She lost the job previous to the one at the hospital because the company, which was implementing a large project in coordination with the US, was hit badly by the 2008 crisis. As a consequence, the whole project failed. The company before that one decided not to extend her temporary contract because of the crisis as well. This happened in July, 2008.

The private hospital where Charlotte was currently working was in a merger with several other hospitals. A lot of people were being fired, and the company was being restructured. Charlotte stated that she had to carry the workload of two people, and she never had time for lunch. In addition to what the company was going through, she also explained that on a personal level, she was simply looking for a change. She adopted this positioning in order to be seen by the recruiter in more favourable light. However,

it was the difficult working conditions and the job insecurity that actually led her to look for a new job.

### Extract 7.3

- CHA: Muchos despidos, muchos movimientos, muchos cambios, (...) mucha incertidumbre, mucha indefinición y además pues ya después de los años que llevo aquí también apetece un cambio (...)
- CAR: ¿y el departamento ahora ha disminuido?
- CHA: ahora, a ver se ha reestructurado, ha habido salidas de gente, ha habido gente que han movido fuera de recursos humanos, está todo muy revuelto.

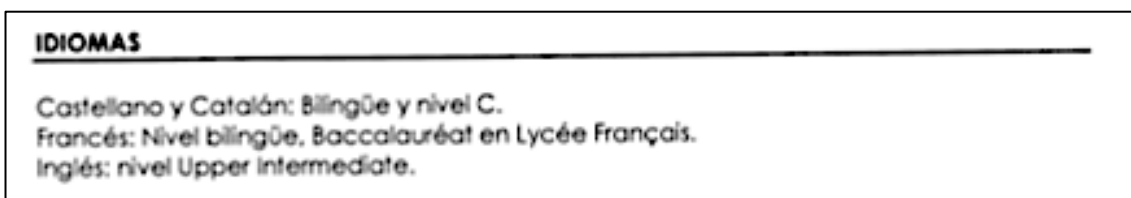
### Translation of Extract 7.3

- CHA: *A lot of layoffs, a lot of movements, a lot of changes, (...) a lot of uncertainty, a lot of uncertainty and also after all the years I've been here, I also feel like a change (..)*
- CAR: *and the number of employees in the department has decreased now?*
- CHA: *now, it has been restructured, some people left, some people were moved out of human resources, everything is in turmoil.*

Interview observation, candidate Charlotte, Spencer Junior, 13/11/2017

Charlotte studied English at school, but she admits that back then—she finished French baccalaureate in 1997—school English was not good. She spent two summers in Britain to improve her English, and she also attended a language academy in Barcelona. When she reached an upper-intermediate level, she gave up her English training. On her CV, Charlotte stated her English level as upper intermediate, which was in line with the English skills requirement that would flag this candidate's CV as "eligible".

### Image 7.1 CV Fragment





### Translation of Image 7.1

**Languages**

*Castilian and Catalan: Bilingual and level C.*

*French: Bilingual level. Baccaureate at French Lyceum.*

*English: level Upper intermediate*

CV, candidate Charlotte, 13/11/2017

Throughout her working career, Charlotte only used her English skills at one multinational company (German) where she had to read emails in English. As alluded to in the previous chapter (Extract 6.18), Charlotte was rejected for the position at the human resources department at a German multinational after the interview with the employer.

### Image 7.2

#### Job Announcement

**Qué necesitarás para encajar con el puesto**

Buscamos un perfil senior con experiencia como Talent Acquisition en entornos en los que haya gestionado proyectos. **Imprescindible nivel alto de inglés** y formación en Empresariales, Psicología, RRLL o similares. Valorable haber trabajado en entornos multinacionales y con el ERP SAP. A nivel personal buscamos a una persona con alta orientación al cliente y a procesos, capaz de trabajar en equipo, con iniciativa, proactiva y con habilidades de negociación.

### Translation of Image 7.1

**What do you need for this position?**

*We are looking for a senior profile with experience as Talent Acquisition in environments where this person has managed projects. Indispensable is the high level of English and training in Business Administration, Psychology, human resources or similar. Experience in multinational environments and with SAP ERP is valued. On a personal level, we are looking for a person with high orientation towards clients and processes, capable of working in a team with initiative, proactive and with negotiation abilities.*

Job announcement, Talent Acquisition, Spencer Junior, 22/11/2017

At the interview at Spencer, she was encouraged to improve her English based on her oral evaluation, in which she honestly admitted that her spoken English was not great. As Charlotte reflected on the interview with the potential employer, she pointed out that the interviewer did not ask her very many specific questions, and she guessed (correctly) that it was because she was not the type of person they were looking for. She never knew the reason she was unsuccessful but she wondered if it might have been due to her English skills. As Charlotte carries out her job search, she is finding that English

skills are consistently among the job requirements. She believes that English is necessary because there are many multinational companies in Barcelona, and she would like to reach an advanced level because she thinks people who have advanced knowledge in English also earn more.

#### **Extract 7.4**

CHA: En el sector en el que yo estoy buscando ahora, veo que cada vez más, cada vez más está aumentando la, sí que es el tema de los idiomas, cada vez está más presente. Porque en Barcelona las, el tipo de empresas que hay, y el tipo de tejido empresarial, sí que lo requiere. (...) El nivel económico, las ofertas con con, cuando te solicitan un nivel de idioma avanzado también hay una diferencia económica.

#### **Translation of Extract 7.4**

CHA: *In the sector that I'm looking in now, I see that more and more the, yes it is the language issue, it is becoming more and more present. Because in Barcelona the type of companies that exist, and the type of business network requires it. (...) On an economic level, the offers with with, when they ask for an advanced level of language, there is also an economic difference.*

Semi-structured interview, candidate Charlotte, 22/11/2017

Charlotte does not question the need for companies to employ workers with English, nor why access to jobs should be contingent on English skills in a market where she may never actually need to use them. She buys into the logic of investment in English (Flubacher, Duchêne, and Coray, 2018), and her thinking is shaped by neoliberal rationality (Martín Rojo and Del Percio, 2020), a discourse on individual economic gain linked to language skills, which she picked up on because of her work in human resources. However, she is not ready to act on this logic, as she has not yet signed up for English classes.

Dalia, 35, has a degree in Economics. She used to work in the purchasing department of a large company where she had to oversee the supply chain. She stated that she was a responsible hard worker, but she often overworked because of her very demanding manager. Her job became so stressful that she developed a health problem, which forced her to quit her job. Dalia then worked in a shop for a year—a less demanding and less sedentary role—and when her health improved, she started looking for an office job again. She pointed out that in 2007, when she was a university graduate, companies

actively went after employees, and there were a lot of jobs available. However, as she began her latest job search, she observed that there had been a discernible shift in the labour market. Ten years ago, there were a lot of jobs available and no requirement for English, while now getting a job had become much harder and it was frequently contingent on one's English skills.

### Extract 7.5

- DAL: When I finished my career, 10 years ago, the, the  
RES: the degree  
DAL: my degree, the mercado was different than now, that actually. It was different.  
RES: how different was it?  
DAL: how different? Mm, I was a lot of calls in, in my mobile about a lot of companies that was interested in me. Because I was recens, recien, reciently degree and  
RES: you got your  
DAL: a lot of them. Now actually you have to, to, to: go to the companies. The companies didn't go to you  
RES: are not coming for you  
DAL: exactly. This is change. 10 years ago, all change. And now e:m, you need English for all, for all, for all, for all. For all. English. English.

Semi-structured interview, candidate Dalia, 26/04/2017

Seeing this difference in the labour market, and that jobs required English, Dalia decided to improve her English skills and signed up for English classes at a private language academy in the town where she lived. When she was younger, she had spent a few summers in Cardiff where she had had a job as a member of the administrative staff at a school. At the language academy, Dalia studied for two years. She took an upper intermediate course and a first certificate prep course. Dalia embraced the neoliberal logic was requiring her to upgrade her English knowledge, and although she had already taken steps to learn English as a university student, ten years later she was having to retake English courses and invest in language skills again.

Joel, 52, had a degree in Foreign Commerce and Marketing, and at the time of the interview, he had been unemployed for two years. During his professional career, he has only worked for two firms in administration. Then he established his own company, which specialized in promotion and optimization of his clients' webpages. This company existed for 3 years and became inactive in 2015 as clients could no longer afford his services due to difficult economic conditions. As Joel looked for a job, he observed that

English was a job requirement for many of the positions he applied for. As a result, he also decided to study English.

### Extract 7.6

JOE: Yo estudié inglés cuando iba hace muchos años, cuando iba al colegio y luego un año en la universidad y después como ya cuando en lo que trabajaba, no necesitaba el inglés, pues lo dejé de lado. Y ahora al estar en el paro, y al ver que ahora no es como antes, sí que piden inglés en todos los sitios, pues hace justamente pues este año, este año pasado que he empezado el verano pasado que hice un, un curso intensivo de inglés.

### Translation of Extract 7.6

JOE: *I studied English many years ago, when I went to school and then for a year at the university and then when I was working, I did not need English, so I put it aside. And now that I am unemployed, and seeing that now it is not like before, that they ask for English everywhere, well, just this year, last year, I started an intensive English course last summer.*

Semi-structured interview, candidate Joel, 18/04/2017

Diego, Charlotte, Dalia, and Joel needed to find a new job, as the companies they were working for were undergoing mergers and restructuration and were laying off workers. As a consequence of these changes, workers were unhappy in their jobs because they had to increase their productivity, they were underappreciated, and they were experiencing job insecurity or even unemployment. The job announcements these job-seekers browsed and the jobs they applied for—each in their own sector—required English skills, which was an observable change in comparison with the labour market a decade ago (right before the economic crisis of 2008), when there were plenty of jobs available and there was no English requirement. These same job-seekers all studied English at schools, universities, and private language academies, and some of them even spent time in Britain when they were younger. Nevertheless, they found themselves unprepared for the English skills level companies required for access to jobs in the second decade of the 21st century. Their existing English skills had become decapitalized (Martín Rojo, 2013). The job-seekers expressed the sentiment that they had “left English aside” because they were not using it on the job, in essence, assuming responsibility for being “unprepared” for the jobs that were available. In accordance with the neoliberal logic, they were compliant with the need to develop their own skills (Gershon, 2011; Harvey, 2005; Moyer, 2018). They decided to resume studying English, as they

understood its value for the labour market. English skills were also linked with the logic of individual economic gain that recruitment agencies actively promulgate.

## 7.2 Understanding the game

Candidates who have been looking for a job and finding that English skills come up in a lot of job offers in their sectors see the link between the English skills requirement and the activity of recruitment agencies. They understand that English skills are needed to improve their employability (Flubacher, Duchêne, and Coray, 2018), rather than to carry out job tasks in English. This understanding stems from their awareness of the daily work routines that do not require the use of spoken or advanced English. In addition, many candidates have had recruitment experiences that made clear that the requirement represents an added value rather than a functional necessity. Given that they are left with little recourse but to continue seeking work where they can, candidates still applied for jobs notwithstanding the English requirement, thus subverting (Codó, 2013) the recruitment practices in question.

Alejandro is a service manager at a British company that offers environmental cleaning services that include cleaning industrial machines and detoxifying the environment from chemicals. Alejandro's main responsibility is to ensure that quality service is provided to customers. He also manages a team of sales representatives and administrative staff. He is not happy with his current job for several reasons. Firstly, his company was sold, and it is now more focused on sales and PR than on its employees. Alejandro has to make short-term decisions he does not like. Secondly, he no longer has his salary bonuses. Finally, he does not like his new boss, and he argues with him a lot. Alejandro wants to find another job, which is why he is taking private classes at a language academy. He understands that his employability (Flubacher, Duchêne, and Coray, 2018) will improve if he learns English. At the same time, he is aware that he does not really need advanced English for work.

### Extract 7.7

- RES: Tell me if in these interviews they asked you about English or if it in the job offer...
- ALE: yes, always in the jobs, this is, I think, this is, m:, if you want to:, or what you have to, to know, I try to, I am trying to improve my English in order to get the First Certificate, because at least for Spaniards it's a key, to, to get higher jobs, or, because then at least, or this is my point of view, in:... in mostly jobs (...) The English language, not a: not a spoken English, not

a written English. For example, I work in a UK company and I don't, I'm not used to speak at work in English, I don't need it, but I like to learn languages, and for me, and mmm e:, I want, I like (...) I think nowadays is much more important the English level you have than your degree. This is my point of view and this is my:: (..)

RES: Perception

ALE: perception, my feelings, because in many job vacancies, in many, at least in this kind of management or manager of a sale or branch, e:, managing people, services or trading, I, I think or no:, I feel that I could be ideal or a good, em:,

RES: candidate?

ALE: candidate, but for example you have to have a proficy level, an Advanced level, e:m, at least be able to speak German too, or French, or or French too.... So, in many times I think, or I feel that I could be a good candidate, a serious candidate, to get in this opportunity, but, mmm, in many e:, English is mandatory, English is mandatory is English mandatory and... (...) Nowadays the most important is to improve my English, and to, to: get a: a mo:re flaiens

RES: Fluency

ALE: fluency in English, umm, and try to get a certificate, so (...) to access to that job vacancy that I am sure that I will be a good candidate.

Semi-structured interview, candidate Alejandro, 27/04/2017

Since Alejandro's company is British, he sometimes communicates with colleagues in the UK or Portugal via email, but he does not use English to communicate with his team in Barcelona. Alejandro is convinced that while spoken English is not needed in most jobs including his own, it is nevertheless key for gaining access to employment. He states that, in fact, English is more important than a university degree when it comes to recruitment processes. Interestingly, Alejandro also points out that what he is trying to achieve is not just an advanced level of English, but fluency. For that purpose, he attends a two-hour conversational class per week with a native speaker. In Alejandro's view, English is linked with "higher jobs", which means he has hopes that his improved English will help him achieve economic success and professional growth.

Celia, 38, is a financial controller who has ten years of experience at a multinational company in the healthcare and insurance sector, who claims that she does not need English in order to be able to do her job. When she quit her job, she learnt that her former position had an advanced English requirement. When she explains this situation at the interview, there is indignation in her voice:

### Extract 7.8

CEL: The job/ it wasn't important the- the English/.

- RES: =uhuh
- CEL: =in some cases, in some situations like (.) I tell\ you, with the:: interviews, the: the meetings, (.) but e: in general/ you::
- RES: =this level/ (.)was not that\ necessary
- CEL: =no but it's a: I don't know how say a *requisito*/, a requirement of the company, of the: of the headquarter/ and (.) in in the time that I am working in- in that company/, year: after day/, after year/, this requirement/ (.) it was very important\. For \my position/ when I/ left
- RES: when you quit your job/
- CEL: when I quit my job/, the the person who:: replace me/ e: needs an advanced e:: level of English. (...) But I don't use English in my days\ (.) of work\ but it's a requirement/

Semi-structured interview, candidate Celia, 26/04/2017

This indignation of Celia's is a response to the mismatch she observed between the requirement for English and her actual job tasks. She considers it unfair to require advanced English from a person whose daily routine consists in working with Excel sheets and tables. Job-seekers like Celia, Diego, and Dalia, consider that English is an impediment for their access to jobs created by the recruitment agencies. In their view, recruitment agencies are receiving a lot of job applications—as there are many people looking for work—and simply choosing the candidates who have more and better skills. Celia's indignation refers not just to the observable injustice in the mismatch between requirement and language use, but also to the fact that highly qualified professionals have to compete for their jobs on the basis of English skills rather than their professional qualifications. Celia positions herself as opposed to such practices (Moyer, 2013). Diego concluded that recruiters are behind the requirement for English: even though recruiters initially asked him about his English skills, at some point the English requirement was dropped, and he was invited to the next round of interviews. Alex got the job he applied for at the American beverage company.

### Extract 7.9

- DIE: También me he dado cuenta que a veces pasa a un segundo plano si:, si el puesto no va a necesitar de la lengua inglesa. Al final lo utilizan como un corte más para, para, e:, hacer criba y quitar e:, de los mil curriculums que les llegan quitar más de la mitad, ¿vale? Y lo utilizan más como una herramienta más para eso que para otra cosa. (...) Bueno como ya me había pasado anteriormente, yo tampoco le di la importancia del inglés que tenía, sabía que en principio no lo iba a utilizar dentro de mi puesto. O lo iba a utilizar muy poco, entonces, bueno yo sabía que con la experiencia que yo tenía, podía optar al puesto. Yo siempre se lo he dejado claro

que mi conocimiento de inglés es muy básico, y que bueno si querían que siguiese el proyecto adelante, pues que tenían que saber que no, que el conocimiento que tenía era ese. E:, me dijeron que sí que no había problema, y que estaría bien que siguiese estudiando inglés, y que mejorara. Porque seguramente si quisiese crecer dentro de la empresa lo iba a necesitar. Pero que en un principio pues que no había ningún problema si no tenía un nivel alto de inglés. Y:, bueno pues nada, hicimos varias entrevistas, de hecho el inglés pasó a un segundo y tercer plano, te diría.

### Translation of Extract 7.9

*DIE: I have also noticed that sometimes it becomes secondary, i:f, if the position is not going to need the English language. In the end they use it as one more cut for e:, screening and e:, discarding, from more than a thousand CVs they remove more than half, right? And they use it more as a tool for that than anything else. (...) Well, as it had happened to me before, I did not give much importance to the English I had, I knew that at the beginning I was not going to use it in my job. Or I was going to use it very little, so, well, I knew that with the experience I had, I could apply for the job. I have always made it clear to them that my knowledge of English is very basic, and if they wanted to go ahead with the project, they had to know that was the knowledge I had. E:, they told me that there was no problem, it would be good for me to continue studying English, to improve. Because surely if I wanted to grow within the company I was going to need it. But in principle there was no problem if I did not have a high level of English. A:nd, so, well, nothing, we did several interviews, in fact English took a secondary and a tertiary position, I would say.*

Semi-structured interview, candidate Diego, 18/07/2018

This example (Extract 7.9) reflects the screening and evaluation practices observed at recruitment agencies. They post job announcements with an advanced English requirement for jobs that do not require English and carry out CV and phone-screening to prioritize profiles that have English. As is clear from Extract 7.9, candidates like Diego apply to the jobs in spite of the advanced requirement because they believe that they are eligible for the positions advertised due to their professional qualifications. As pointed out by Piekkari et al., (2014), people's careers depend not only on the requirements established, but also on their understanding of these requirements and the actions they undertake in response. Job-seekers like Diego resist (Ahearn, 2001; Martín Rojo, 2013) the English requirement and, in doing so, subvert (Codó, 2013) the recruitment practice. In their turn, recruiters introduce more screening tools, such as killer questions, and they are forced to verify people's skills on the phone and at in-person interviews. Resistance to the requirement leads to an even stricter institutional practice that influences the way English is checked in the interviews as a language competence. The fact that the requirement is minimized in Diego's case proves that it



performs a screening function. The positive aspects of Diego’s CV and his soft skills convinced recruiters that he might be a good fit, particularly thanks to his ability to negotiate with clients—which is an aspect of Diego’s profile that the American beverage company, “Strong Spirit”, appreciates as they hire Diego. However, throughout the selection process, recruiters do not stop mentioning to Diego that English skills are important. They link English to possibilities of future promotion. After a year in his job at “Strong Spirit”, Diego asks the company to provide him with English classes. He does not use English at work. The corporate emails he receives are always in three languages, English, Catalan, and Spanish. What changes is that he starts seeing himself as a neoliberal subject (Martín Rojo and Del Percio, 2020) and he enacts his neoliberal agency (Gershon, 2011). English skills indeed are important, but not so much for Diego as for the recruiters who can use them to sell the next candidate to their client.

Joel, whose English is intermediate, has learnt to navigate the job recruitment game. He applies to those jobs which have an English requirement but which do not mention a need for international communication.

#### **Extract 7.10**

**JOE:** Ya hay algunas ofertas que piden que sepas perfecto el inglés porque has de hablar con clientes internacionales, entonces este ya no lo envío porque yo para tener una hablar perfectamente con un extranjero en inglés, pues, tengo dificultades. Entonces este ya no los envío, pero hay otras ofertas que aunque piden nivel advanced, el por lo que veo la mayoría de empresas para auxiliar administrativo ya piden esto, y a veces no lo necesitan. Ya lo ponen veo muchas veces ya de manera pues mecánica, que que quieren esto, y muchas veces pues no hace falta tampoco este nivel.

#### **Translation of Extract 7.10**

**JOE:** *There are already some offers that ask you to know English perfectly because you have to speak with international clients, so I don't send it because I have difficulties to speak perfectly with a foreigner in English. So I do not send these but there are other offers that even though they ask for advanced level, as far as I can see most of companies, for administrative assistant already ask for this, and sometimes they don't need it. Many times they ask for it in a mechanical way, that that they want this, and often it is not necessary to have this level.*

Semi-structured interview, candidate Joel, 18/04/2017

Candidate Joel has discerned the difference between the two variations of the English skills requirement, which is understood by the recruiters as a “plus” or an added

value, and a work instrument or a “must”. He has understood that requiring an advanced level of English that does not have a reference to the job tasks associated with English is an added value. Similar to how Diego has resisted the English skills requirement, Joel applies only to the jobs where he imagines that English is not needed. This candidate is not simply resisting because the requirement is unjustified, but also because his chance of finding a job is at stake.

Thus, candidates who have had experiences with recruitment agencies and who have changed jobs or have been looking for a job, understand that English skills are used by recruitment agencies more as a screening tool than a skill that is needed on the job. Both candidates and recruiters understand that there are jobs where the English is nothing more than an added value. However, the difference in their understanding is that recruiters seem to be unaware or neglectful of the fact that they have created a recruitment pattern and practice that selects people on the basis of an unjustified requirement. They construct the “legitimacy” of this requirement by providing discourse about the client company being foreign or multinational and implying that candidates *need* English for their future promotions and employability. They naturally take the companies’ side by calling on workers to adapt and cover the skills gap that exists, because, as an intermediary business, recruitment agencies derive their profits from the client firm in the first place. However, while recruitment agencies produce the very skills gap they claim exists, they also make the client believe that workers do not have English skills, which plays in favor of their business, as they make candidates with English more appealing to the clients.

The candidates, presented in this section, found themselves in need of English skills, even though they do not use them at the multinational companies where most of them are currently employed. Recruiters are aware that candidates do not use English on the job, because at Spencer and IT Power they tend to ask candidates questions about it. However, in light of the fact that they do not use English at work, these candidates are not considered as valuable as those who have work experiences where they *do* use English.

Noel, who is applying for a position of as a designer mechanic, and who currently works at a multinational company which makes machines used in agriculture, explains that the sales department takes care of all the work related with languages.

### Extract 7.11

- ALF: Como me has dicho que la empresa es internacional, ¿puede que también haya parte en inglés?
- NOE: la:, toda la parte en inglés la hacen los comerciales.
- ALF: vale,
- NOE: en inglés y en las lenguas que las hagan porque una cosa es los manuales que hacemos nosotros, que son destinados a nuestro propio equipo para hacer el montaje y como tienen que ubicar el de esto, y luego están los manuales de, como sería el folleto de publicidad de las máquinas y eso que eso estaría hecho y no sé a quién lo encargan creo que son los comerciales, los que lo hacen

### Translation of Extract 7.11

- ALF: *As you told me that the company is international, maybe there is also a part in English?*
- NOE: *La:, all the English part is done by the sales people.*
- ALF: *ok,*
- NOE: *in English and in the languages that they do them because one thing is the manuals that we do, which are intended for our own team to do the assembly and how they have to place it, and then there are the manuals of, as would be the advertising brochure of the machines and that would be done and I don't know who they order it from, I think it's the sales people, who do it*

Interview observation, candidate Noel, IT Power, 01/04/2019

Similarly, candidate Paul, a project engineer who has two Master's degrees and who is applying for a job as production engineer at a firm that produces industrial machinery, explains that he studied English because his firm had headquarters in Germany, where he used English a little. However, he then adds that English only came up in small job responsibilities, such as emails.

### Extract 7.12

- VAL: Vale, inglés, ¿qué nivel tienes actualmente?<sup>25</sup>
- PAU: hice first hace bastante tiempo, por central en Alemania<sup>26</sup>
- VAL: hablamos un poco<sup>27</sup>, when was the first time speaking the language?
- PAU: when I was 7, my parents told me you have to study English, I went to a language academy for 7/8 years, then I did a course and got the certificate, and then I finished with it.
- VAL: could you speak it in the job?
- PAU: unfortunately, I could not. But in small responsibilities, like emails it came up.
- VAL: what is the most valuable for you in future job?

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<sup>25</sup> VAL: *Ok, what level of English do you have at the moment?*

<sup>26</sup> PAU: *I did first quite a while ago, because of the headquarter in Germany.*

<sup>27</sup> VAL: *let's talk a bit*

PAU: the conditions, you have to be very flexible about the time you are working, I don't appreciate companies that work like in the last century.

Interview observation, candidate Paul, Spencer Junior, 16/03/2018

The last two examples provide further evidence that candidates do not use English, especially spoken English, on the job. They do have knowledge of English that they obtained earlier in their careers. However, this knowledge does not allow them to compete for access to jobs; while they have the technical English skills required to carry out actual work tasks, recruiters are looking for English as a soft skill, which is required to sell the candidate to the client. Through their recruitment practices, recruitment agencies have candidates' employability contingent on English. This means that even those who are currently employed have to start thinking about their next job and take steps to ensure they remain employable.

### **7.3 English skills and employability**

This section further explores the cases of candidates Celia, Joel, and Dalia, and it introduces the case of Ramón. By tracing the steps each candidate took in order to get a new job, and by unpacking their recruitment journeys, I aim to shed light on the key role English skills play in access to jobs and the ways in which they open or limit opportunities for people seeking work, which in turn affects their overall work trajectories. I also explore the interview experiences of the candidates at the companies they applied to, and how both the candidates and the company hiring managers understood and managed the English requirement.

Celia—a financial controller who had been working at her multinational firm for ten years—felt it was time for a promotion. She admitted that she did not use English at work, but she nevertheless needed an advanced level in order to meet the requirement for promotion. She applied for three different positions at her firm, but she was rejected because she did not meet the English requirement.

#### **Extract 7.13**

CEL: I am the person who did the reporting of the company, the financial reporting.  
RES: and how does the job title sound in Spanish?  
CEL: err, controller, yes but my level of in the company was a technical, and I review the account of the accountant and I did the the reports to the directions,

RES: did you do this for a certain department or for the whole company?  
CEL: for all  
RES: for the whole company, wow, it's a lot of work  
CEL: and I, I like this work, but I I need a change  
RES: so did you apply for different positions within the company  
CEL: yes, in three appliment  
RES: well you applied for three different [jobs, job positions, yeah]  
CEL: [yes, yes] in three times the reason that they don't promote me was was was the level of English. Because they need a person to: to receive the: the: the English people of the central of the company  
RES: uhuh of the headquarters  
CEL: the headquarter  
RES: and need a fluency English  
CEL: And  
RES: do you mean physically receive in the office in Spain?  
CEL: yes yes. And the conversations in meeting, via telephone, email and  
RES: should be done in English  
CEL: yes, and and when I

Semi-structured interview, candidate Celia, 26/04/2017

Celia applied to a financial controller position in another department that was similar to the position she already held. When she was subsequently rejected, she decided to sign up at a language academy in order to improve her English. Celia noted that since she did not practise English on the job, the only way to improve was to take language classes, which meant investing her time and money into English. She attended classes regularly for two years, and she completed the upper intermediate and first certificate courses. However, her spoken English still was not good enough for her to be eligible for a promotion. She applied for the same position of financial controller that she had previously attempted, as well as for the position of head of administration and finance. When her applications were rejected, her company justified its decision by stating that she would have to receive delegations from the company headquarters abroad. Identical justifications were observed at Spencer and IT Power, typically for positions such as Registry Technician, a role which did not include receiving visits among its job responsibilities. Such explanations could be produced either to merely justify the requirement (as was the case at Spencer, where the recruiter noted the company was far from internationalization), or because companies already had a need for someone who could communicate with foreigners and an existing staff that was not able to do so. It was easier for a company to hire a new person and add this task to their work load

rather than to provide existing staff with the necessary training. Celia would need to participate in the financial reporting meetings with her bosses from Britain, but she already did that in her current position. The truth was that in Celia's case, the advanced requirement for English was company policy. Even Celia's own position had a requirement for advanced English that went into effect once she quit.

#### Extract 7.14

- CEL: It wasn't enough to  
RES: to get the job like what you, what you'd learnt by then wasn't enough for you to [get a certain position  
CEL: [yes, because they wanted a, an advanced level, a native people  
RES: uhuh, a native speaker  
CEL: yes, speaker. In that company is very typical that err, have a native e:m they hire, the company hires  
RES: native speakers  
CEL: yes, from the other countries with English language. It's very typical, I had a colleague with English  
RES: with advanced level  
CEL: yes, yes

Semi-structured interview, candidate Celia, 26/04/2017

According to Extract 7.14, the company policy requiring advanced English was limiting jobs to near-native English speakers from other countries. Celia's updated knowledge of English and her two-year investment of money and time were not sufficient for her to secure a better job at the company. The reason she was ineligible was the way the evaluation of language competence was carried out. Celia was perfectly able to express herself in English, but she was not as fluent as a native or near-native speaker after two years of practicing English at a language school. Celia protested against the requirement by saying "but I work in Spain, I cannot be bilingual". Celia hit the language ceiling and a language wall (Piekkari et al., 2014), since she was unable to make a vertical career move or a lateral career move inside her own firm. It is possible that the positions were reserved for profiles that would be more cost-efficient to hire. Since Celia had seniority she would be more expensive to keep with the firm. It is clear that the company was profiling candidates, as Celia reported to have foreign colleagues who would indeed have met the English requirement.

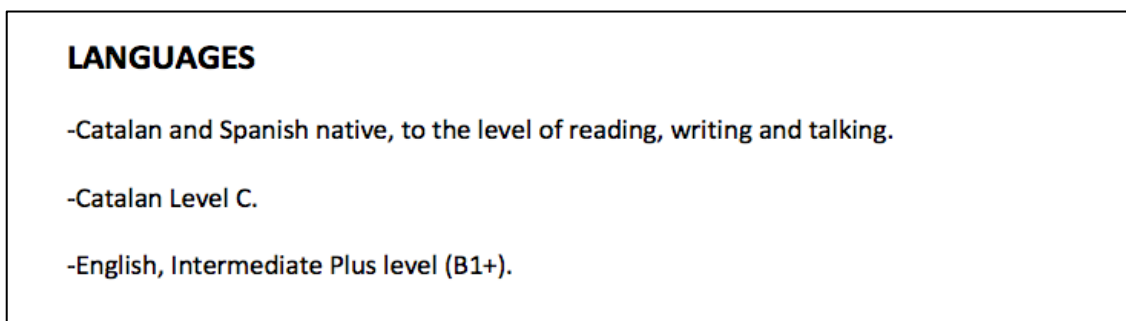
Since Celia's options at her own company were limited due to the unachievable English requirement, she decided to look for a job at another company. She chose to do so via well-known recruitment agencies, including Spencer, and she applied to various jobs through them. According to Celia, there were many applicants in places like Spencer. When she was uploading her CV to apply for a job post managed by Spencer, the system showed that there had already been around 100 applications, which made her feel very insecure. "Others could be better prepared." Celia got to the second round of interviews with the client company because her qualifications were excellent. A small part of the second interview was in English. She had to use financial vocabulary in English, which is very specific, and it made Celia nervous. There was no doubt that Celia was knowledgeable in her field. However, the English evaluation could have made her seem less competent with regards to the field of finance, since she was insecure about the terms. Additionally, Celia thought that the interviewers seemed very strict. She was eliminated from the final candidate list without being given a reason for her elimination. Although at Spencer and IT Power some recruiters stated that they take extra effort to let the job candidates know why they were not offered a job, a common thread in the data reveals that candidates are often left in the dark. Given how time-sensitive recruitment work is, it is not surprising that most recruiters do not provide feedback to the candidates who have been rejected. Neither do the companies provide consistent feedback to recruiters as to why they chose one candidate over another. Candidates like Celia conclude that English is one of the reasons they were unable to get the job.

In the end, Celia lowered her expectations. She stopped applying to positions with a high English requirement, nor did she continue going to recruitment agencies like Spencer. Celia found a position (through Infojobs) at a local firm close to her house that specialized in natural medicines. That job post was managed by an unpretentious, outsourced recruiter working from Mallorca. However, she was still asked about her English level during the video call. She said her level was intermediate, although at that time she was already studying for the first certificate exam. She preferred to stick with the intermediate level because that was the level she could comfortably speak. The following week she was invited to the client office, where she had an interview. English was not mentioned, and she thought it might have been unimportant for that position. Which means that English skills were used in the initial recruiter screening, but the

requirement was dropped at the interview with the firm. In the end, she got the job. Three years later Celia applied for a position at an important Spanish company (where there was no requirement for English) that specializes in managing city infrastructure. She became head of a coordination unit that formed part of the executive board, and her team even won an award that had to do with innovation. As one can see, she was a very valid candidate, but multinational companies did not appreciate her because of her non-native English. The fact that Celia could not achieve the near-native competence that was required, combined with the multiple rejections she received as a candidate, led her to reject foreign multinationals altogether and seek work in Spanish companies. Her options of finding employment were reduced.

Joel, 52 and unemployed, applied for many jobs but he was getting few calls in return. He was certain that age was an important factor. He finally managed to attend a round of interviews at a Spanish multinational firm in the pharmaceutical sector, where his sister also works. His CV stated clearly that he had an intermediate level of English.

**Image 7.3**  
CV Extract



CV, candidate Joel, 17/04/2017

The position required an advanced English level, and it was for the sales department. Joel was informed that he would have to talk to providers and clients, as well as with a delegation in Los Angeles. In spite of his “insufficient” English qualifications, Joel managed to get to an interview with the finance director of the firm because his professional qualifications were prioritized over his English skills, which put in question the extent to which English was actually necessary. The finance director really liked Joel for his curriculum—he had only worked in three companies throughout his career.



However, the director pointed out that advanced English was required for the position and that he had to seek approval of his candidacy from the human resources department. The human resources department rejected this candidate. His qualifications, his long work experience, and even the seeming approval of his candidacy by the Finance Director himself did not suffice, as the company's policy was to hire only workers with advanced English.

#### **Extract 7.15**

JOE: Y: que le gustaba mucho mi curriculum, que estaba muy interesado pero que, bueno, faltaba nivel de inglés, que piden advanced, y que tenía que hablar con recursos humanos para ver si: con mi nivel de inglés, me podía coger o no. Y entonces al final, pues, le dijeron que no por el nivel de inglés.

#### **Translation of Extract 7.15**

JOE: *A:nd, he liked my curriculum, he was very interested, but, well, I did not have enough level of English, they ask for advanced, and he had to talk to Human Resources to see whether with my level of English they could take me on or not. So, finally, well, they told him no because of the level of English.*

Semi-structured interview, candidate Joel, 18/04/2017

This recruitment process was as close as Joel got to getting a job. Joel was unemployed for a total of four years, while actively looking for jobs and studying English, until he was finally hired as administrative staff at City Hall of the town near Barcelona where he and his family live. Unfortunately, his temporary contract ended right before the pandemic and he is out of work again. During his interview with me, Joel mentioned that he was also taking several courses to study the specific computer programs of an ERP type (enterprise resource planning software) used in administration that he often sees in job requirements. However, since there were so many, it was unclear to him how to divide his time and which program to choose; he might choose to study a program that will not be needed for his next job interview. This case reflects on how the English requirement limits job options for an older generation of workers. Within the neoliberal framework, they are made responsible for updating their knowledge, not only of English, but also their knowledge of technology that could be easily learnt at the workplace—both of which present a barrier for employment. That is because companies prefer to hire staff that already the desired work experience (Cappelli, 2012). As a result, detailed

requirements for minor things like knowledge of computer programs are taken seriously by recruitment agencies and they fulfil a gatekeeping function.

Dalia, who had been working in a clothing shop for health reasons, filed multiple job applications online. However, because she was not sure how her experience in a clothes shop would reflect on her as a job-seeker, and because she wanted to get back to an office job as soon as possible, she decided to also try finding a job through a temporary job agency (called an *ETT* in Spanish). She printed out a bunch of her CVs and went to try her luck; she was a proactive job-seeker who was not going to wait around for somebody to offer her a job. She also understood that getting a job was not easy, given the present state of the labour market. Dalia finally had some luck at a temp agency. After initially being turned away, the staff agreed to get her an interview with a client once she told them that she spoke good English.

#### Extract 7.16

- DAL: I found my actual job  
RES: this, the present job?  
DAL: the present job, emm, emm, with a ETT.  
RES: uhuh uhuh uhuh  
DAL: yes. I went to hand up  
RES: hand out, to give them  
DAL: my curriculum (.) and I feel feeling with the person that works in the ETT/  
RES: Uhuh  
DAL: then, she told, the first er the ETTs normally they didn't er, catch the curriculum they didn't take it they didn't take the curriculum, this is an una norma (.)  
RES: uhuh, like a rule  
DAL: It's a, it's a general rule (.)  
RES: a regulation?  
DAL: yes, it's a general rule. But if you speak with that pe:rso:n and [ta:  
RES: [Insist on it  
DAL: yes, she take my curriculum  
RES: so she took yours  
DAL: yes yes. First she said me no. But then when I start to speak with she!  
RES: with her uhuh  
DAL: with her, er she take my curriculum. And then she told me that that company that needs an e:r an, an administrative, Err only for 3 months to a: suplencia como/ suplencia  
RES: okay, for a replacement  
DAL: for a vacance, for a replacement, only 3 months, no/. Then I say okay yes I'm interested. because I wanted to change the the job. Then I  
RES: did she ask you, err, what did you put in your CV, did you write down that you had some English skills, [did you have it on your CV  
DAL: [yes, yes er in my CV I: I put my level of English, Catalan and Spanish of course

RES: and which level of English did you put there?  
DAL: ah, ha! I put intermediate. Intermediate level  
RES: you also did B2 last year.  
DAL: yes, hahaha, yes... She asked me for my level of English  
RES: this woman  
DAL: this woman in the ETT, and er ah! She asked me for my level of English  
RES: she took a look at your CV and then she asked about it?  
DAL: yes and ask asked and emm, I tell her that  
RES: I told her  
DAL: I told her that e:rr my English was good and yes. A:nd And she said "Okay! Good!" And write! Something  
RES: and she wrote something there?  
DAL: something and she asked me about the previous jobs, my my studies, all, a little bit a little bit interview.  
RES: Uhuh  
DAL: then she sent my CV to that empresa  
RES: [company  
DAL: [to that company

Semi-structured interview, candidate Dalia, 26/04/2017

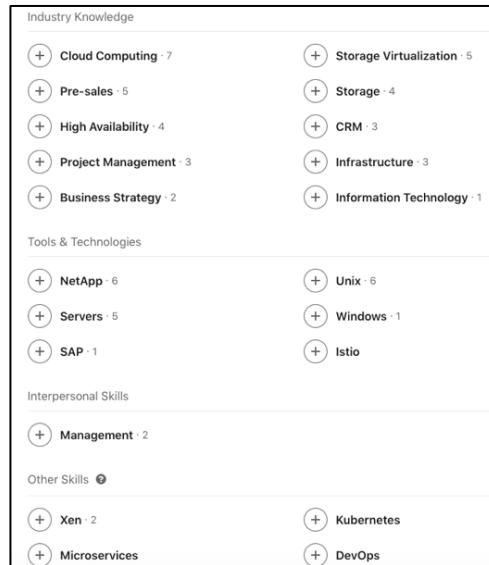
The woman at the temp agency did not initially want to accept Dalia's CV because all the CVs are uploaded to the database electronically by the job applicants themselves. However, after they had started talking, the woman mentioned that she might have a job and took Dalia's CV. Dalia referred to the change in the worker's attitude as a "feeling". She simply liked Dalia and sympathized with her. Next, the woman asked Dalia about her English, and when Dalia reassured her it was good, the woman made a few positive remarks and wrote something down on Dalia's CV. Dalia, who had taken an upper intermediate course at the language academy preferred to lower her English skills level on her CV. However, she self-evaluated positively to the woman at the agency, who did not bother to verify her skills. Candidates Celia and Jose, who were also studying English at the academy, were honest about their spoken English, too. Celia even downplayed her English at the interview, as she was concerned with her real spoken level—which was being evaluated—and not the level of the books she had studied. She adjusted her self-evaluation to the criterion companies used to measure candidates' skills. This was opposite to how some candidates at Spencer talked about their English in interviews. Some candidates emphasized that they had a first certificate—which *was* the level they had studied—but they did not have the spoken level to support it.

A few days later, Dalia was invited to an interview at a company that distributes automotive parts. The position for which she interviewed was in the customer service department. She talked about her studies and her work experience, and she was also asked about English, namely whether she would be able to answer the phone in English. She said yes, and she also backed up her answer by saying she was taking English classes twice a week at a private language academy. The manager did not switch to English to test her level. The interviewer shared his doubts about Dalia as a candidate because of her job in a clothes shop, but she pointed out that she had previously worked in similar corporate positions. She was also asked if she could type well, which she could (she had taken typist courses). Dalia explained to me later that she was sure she could answer calls in English because they generally follow similar patterns.

Dalia was hired on a temporary basis, but when the woman she was replacing returned, nobody fired her. In fact, she even went to tell her boss that she did not understand why she was still working there, as the work load was not enough for three people. She was moved to a catalogue department, where she had to inventory all the things the company sold. She was also offered a permanent contract. She did not use English on the job, however, the bosses always took her to important fairs for their sector which took place in Spain. In Dalia's case, English was an added value, and it was not even checked by means of an oral evaluation either by the woman at the temp agency, or by her employer. However, it played a part in her getting the job, as it made her a more appealing candidate for the woman at the temp agency and for the employer.

Ramón, a sales engineer in his early forties, works for an American company called "Computy", which is headquartered in California. They specialize in computing and data storage. Currently, Ramón's job is to analyze his clients' computing and data storage needs, then try to match them with what his company can offer. His role is analytical in nature. Ramón is a perfect example of a neoliberal subject (Martín Rojo and Del Percio, 2020) who does not stop learning and who promotes his work image (Gershon, 2017). His profile on LinkedIn flashes with the courses he takes and with the work skills he has obtained.

### Image 7.4 Candidate Ramón's Skills Profile



Candidate Ramón's skills profile, LinkedIn, 11/11/2019

English is important for Ramón's job because most of technical documentation he deals with is in English. He is a fluent English speaker, although he did not take any visible or quantifiable effort to achieve good communication skills. Ramón took a few English courses as a teenager, and he also completed a degree at a technical university, where most of the technical information was in English. However, his colleagues have been through the same university, or similar, and they do not have a comparable ability to communicate. Ramón comes from a working class family, similar to the families of all candidates in this chapter.

### Extract 7.17

RAM: In the previous companies where I was working, there are people, highly skilled but not in English. (...) The main concern of these guys is I think that is, being able to read the documentation. And I think that they are able most of the cases to understand, understand most of the documentation that they find which is in English. But when they struggle is when mainly they have to communicate with others. I mean writing and speaking.

Semi-structured interview, candidate Ramón, 21/11/2017

Ramón sees his own advantage in being able to communicate in English effortlessly, and he also believes that English skills can be a professional disadvantage for those who

do not have them: “with a little English, they [his colleagues] would grow exponentially.” Although he admits that his colleagues are able to do their jobs even without having as great a communicative ability as his own.

Ramón used to work for another American company that produces computers. Because of his English skills, he managed to get a better job at “Computy”. The type of recruitment Ramón has experienced is a little unusual because he was not approached by a recruiter first. Ramón was at a marketing event in Madrid as a representative of his old company when he was approached by a manager (of his present company). This manager, despite being Spanish, started talking to him in English, and after a short conversation, he was offered a job:

### **Extract 7.18**

RAM: He approached to me he approached me and asked me a few things, a few informal things in English e: since he was looking for candidates in Barcelona. Something similar to the role I was doing at \*\*Computy. And I think that he thought that I was a good candidate, at least he thought I had enough English level to, to do the job. In fact, it was very informal, very informal situation, I think. We just exchanged a few words in, not very formal, not very formal. And was during an event, e:, a marketing event, a big marketing event that was taking place in Madrid.

Semi-structured interview, candidate Ramón, 21/11/2017

When Ramón was offered a job, he said he was not looking for a new one, but he was willing to hear what the manager had to offer. Right away, he was contacted by an HR manager, who was managing the selection process from Amsterdam. Ramón had four more interviews for the job, which were all in English. The second interview he had was with his technical manager who is Portuguese. At the third interview, Ramón had to give a presentation in English for the French boss. The last interview was with Human Resources. As a result, Ramón was hired by “Computy”, and he went to California for a training that took two weeks. The whole selection process was structured by the company so that a person with a near-native or very fluent English would be eligible for the job. For Ramón, it was his English that made him an attractive and eligible candidate.

This section has looked into the recruitment experiences of four candidates and has outlined how English skills became the key reason for these candidates to get or not get the job. Both recruiters and client company representatives attributed a lot of

importance to English. In the positions where English was an added value, the managers did not verify candidate's English level. In the interviews with the company where English was important due to company policy, candidates had to demonstrate knowledge of English in relation to their field, and sufficient English skills had the potential to make their professional expertise less significant. Celia and Joel invested in English; however, this investment did not play out in their favour because of companies' high criterion and because of how their level of English was evaluated. Evaluation of English skills as a communicative competence produced a boundary (Lamont and Molnár, 2002) which was not easily overcome by learning English in language academies. Additionally, the companies where English skills are important do not seem to invest in their workers' training. Companies prefer to hire new employees rather than retain existing employees, and they profit in the long run because they save on older workers' training and they save on new workers' (lack of) seniority. Finally, for the positions where English seemed to be an essential skill, selection was organized entirely in English, which would only limit these kinds of jobs to people who have a very advanced knowledge of English.

#### **7.4 Interview rhetoric**

This section explores how candidates, whose access to jobs is on the line, grapple with the reality of an English skill evaluation at job interviews. The candidates considered are those in the Engineering, IT, and Finance sectors, where the job task associated with English consists in reading documentation. However, English skills are assessed orally. These cases reflect a common pattern of how candidates for these positions cope with such evaluations.

An oral English skills evaluation at job interviews is intended to expose candidates' lack of communicative ability. The candidates are faced with a dilemma where they have to be honest about their level but also make a positive impression on the recruiter. In these cases, candidates try to mitigate their lack of spoken English skills by pointing out their strengths in other aspects of the language and by providing reasons why they do not have the requested ability. Candidate Noel leads with the fact that he understands English very well, but he acknowledges that he lacks fluency. The explanation for his insufficient spoken skill is presented as lack of practice and time.

### Extract 7.19

- ALF: Vale, ¿y qué nivel dirías que tienes ahora más o menos, \*\*Noel? E, de inglés.  
NOE: de inglés, pues medio. Lo entiendo muy bien.  
ALF: vale  
NOE: bien, y al expresarme pues me falta un poco de fluidez. Por eso, por falta de práctica. Porque yo soy de Andorra, vivo aquí con mi novia, pero claro, todos mis amigos y todo los tengo en Andorra, o sea que, los veo un fin de semana al mes. Entonces, con los amigos que he hecho aquí, pues no hablo con ninguno en inglés la verdad. En Andorra si porque hablaba más con, pues como vienen pistas y vienen gente de todos lados, pues. Y también tienes más tiempo en Andorra. Porque del trabajo a mi casa igual tenía cinco minutos andando.  
ALF: sí, sí. Vale, supongo que para leer documentación,  
NOE: ningún problema  
ALF: ningún problema ¿no? vale. Al final aquí el tema del inglés es un poco para ver el nivel, y luego sobre todo por tema de documentación técnica. No porque la persona vaya a estar hablando para esta posición en concreto. Sino para  
NOE: no, y lo podría hablar perfectamente. Igual tengo que cogermelo dos segundos para pensar bien y no decir una barbaridad, pero podría.  
ALF: vale, genial, \*\*Noel  
NOE: en francés muchísimo más fluido jajaja.

### Translation of Extract 7.19

- ALF: *Ok, and what level would you say you have now, \*\*Noel? E, of English.*  
NOE: *in English, I would say I am average. I understand it very well.*  
ALF: *ok*  
NOE: *well, and when I speak I lack some fluency. Because I lack practice. Because I am from Andorra, I live here with my girlfriend, but of course, all my friends and everything is in Andorra, so I see them one weekend a month. So, with the friends I have made here, I do not really talk to any of them in English. In Andorra I did because I spoke more with, well, as there are ski resorts and people come from all many places, then. And you also have more time in Andorra. Because from work to home I had maybe a five-minute walk.*  
ALF: *yes, yes. I guess to read documentation,*  
NOE: *no problem*  
ALF: *no problem, right? Ok. At the end here the English is a little bit to see the level, and then mainly for technical documentation. Not because the person is going to be speaking for this specific position. But for*  
NOE: *no, I could speak perfectly well. I might have to take two seconds to think about it and not say anything dumb but I could.*  
ALF: *ok, great, \*\*Noel*  
NOE: *in French much, much more fluent ahahah*

Interview observation, IT Power, candidate Noel, 01/04/2019

Julio is a candidate applying for a position as a Junior Front-End Programmer at a multinational company which is developing software for a smart city project. The technology is going to be implemented in another English-speaking country. On his CV,



Julio has stated an intermediate level; however, on his LinkedIn page, his level of English is marked as working proficiency. This way, he can appear in recruitment databases and be called for an interview. When asked about his English skills by recruiter Alfredo, from IT Power, Julio echoes Noel's answer by first producing a positive self-display as he points out good writing, reading, and listening skills, and then admitting to having a lower level of spoken English. Likewise, Julio explains his lack of spoken ability as a lack of practice and a sense of shame that he feels when struggling to formulate his ideas in English. This evaluation takes an interesting course, as the candidate only uses short affirmations in response to Alfredo's stimuli. He is then asked whether he can take an English test at the client firm, which consists in reading a text and summarizing it. Julio provides an insecure indirect answer and does not participate actively in the conversation. He only elaborates on the answer when asked about his English studies and the reason for improving his language skill. He follows up by explaining that he is improving his English because he feels obligated by the existing job requirements, "I have to, I have to study English for his reason". The candidate takes responsibility for self-skilling.

### Extract 7.20

- ALF: Genial, \*\*Julio, pues bueno, quedaría para cerrar la entrevista, hablar un poco a nivel de condiciones, vale, y luego también veo por aquí no a nivel de idiomas, y de hobbies y tal que me lo pones por aquí pero bueno, (...) inglés medio, este inglés, qué tal es, me dijiste creo que estabas en torno a un B1, sacando el B2 actualmente.<sup>28</sup>
- JUL: sí, sí. Actualmente o sea tengo un nivel técnico leído y y leído y y o sea, de entender una conversación, no no tengo problemas, lo que me cuesta más que es lo que te comentaba que estaba trabajando es el tema de de soltarme para para hablarlo. Que me cuesta aún un poco el tema de un poco de vergüenza y tal pero, pero bueno, en lo que estoy trabajando ahora con el, con el B2 también. Soltarme un poco más, no tener que pensar la solución en mi cabeza y ser más, tener más soltura en este aspecto.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> ALF: *Great, \*\*Julio, well, it would be left to close the interview, talk a little about conditions, okay, and then I also see here about languages level, and hobbies and such that you put it here but hey, (...) intermediate English, this English, how is it, you told me I think you were around a B1, currently taking B2.*

<sup>29</sup> JUL: *yes, yes. Currently, I mean I have a technical level read and read and and that is, to understand a conversation, I have no no problems, what is more difficult which is what I told you I was working on is the issue of of letting go to speak it. That it is still difficult a bit the issue of a bit of shame and such but, but hey, what I am working on now with, with the B2 as well. Letting go a little more, not having to think about the solution in my head and being more, having more ease in this regard.*

ALF: vale, ok. ¿Te importaría hablar un poco en inglés conmigo y veo también el nivel y lo chequeamos?<sup>30</sup>

JUL: vale.<sup>31</sup>

ALF: pues, e:;<sup>32</sup> \*\*Julio, we continue talking in English for a few minutes,

JUL: ok

ALF: and er I I should tell you that next phases of the selection process, er, it will be an interview with IT manager, of \*\*SmartCity. So:, the manager does a technical test (.)

JUL: uhuh

ALF: and English test too (.)

JUL: okay

ALF: it's about comprehension, it's about the reading, listening is not, but it will be an oral, an oral part. Alright? so, \*\*Julio, how did you see that?

JUL: well, I guess I don't have any problem for, to do that. So, I guess I, I think I can do it. So, it's not a problem for me.

ALF: now you are currently studying B2, no?

JUL: in, yes

ALF: or not

JUL: yeah yeah, currently I am studying the B2 level in UOC, at UOC in Universidad Oberta de Catalunya, Catalonia, and yeah, I am studying currently B2.

ALF: and why are you studying it? Do you want to improve your level? Or why?

JUL: well, to be honest, e: nowadays the the the main jobs positions requires English so, I have to study English, I have to study English for this reason. And yeah, I want improve my English too and also for when I have to, when I have to travel with my friends or my girlfriend I really need to talk in English. So these these are the reasons.

ALF: vale, genial \*\*Julio, bueno.<sup>33</sup>

Interview observation, IT Power, candidate Julio, 28/03/2019

Oscar is applying for a job as Designer Mechanic at a multinational company that specializes in 3D designs. Similar to the previous two candidates, Oscar evaluates his English skills positively, emphasizing the possibility for more progress in the near future. When asked to elaborate on the different aspects of his skill, he also acknowledges having a weaker spoken ability. The candidate starts feeling very insecure as soon as he faces an oral evaluation. In fact, he insists that his skills are very basic several times during the course of the interview. Oscar admits that he only uses English for reading, which is the reason why he has not developed spoken English as a work skill. Although Oscar would like his job to provide him with an opportunity to improve his English, he also understands his responsibility to acquire the skill on his own time. This statement

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<sup>30</sup> ALF: *ok ok. Would you mind speaking a little English with me and I also see the level and we check it?*

<sup>31</sup> JUL: *ok*

<sup>32</sup> ALF: *Then, e:;*

<sup>33</sup> ALF: *ok, great \*\*Julio, good.*

reflects on his compliance with the neoliberal worker's role. The example reveals how candidates are immersed in a complex situation where they have to account for self-skilling for the sake of accessing jobs that refuse to provide them with the training they would potentially need.

### Extract 7.21

- ALF: En la parte técnica, ¿a nivel de idiomas? ¿Qué nivel dirías que tienes ahora mismo, \*\*Oscar?
- OSC: de inglés estoy en un, estoy estudiando inglés, estoy haciendo el B1 ahora. El año que viene podría ir por el First
- ALF: vale
- OSC: pero ahora estoy en B1. Voy haciendo, sí, sí. Ja, ja.
- ALF: vale. ¿Cómo te verías a nivel de comprensión de documentación técnica, a nivel escrito, a nivel oral?
- OSC: oral, bueno pues costaría un poquito más, pero escrito y tal y leído bien, incluso escuchado bien. Oral, a ver puedo hablar y comprender conversaciones así a nivel básico,
- ALF: uhuh
- OSC: poco a poco voy aprendiendo inglés también. Sí, sí. Estoy en ello.
- ALF: vale, ¿podríamos mantener una pequeña conversación en, en inglés para ver un poquito cómo te manejas? Simplemente por, por ver nivel. No te asustes e tampoco.
- OSC: bueno, vale, vale vamos a:, pero bueno ya te digo que, que, poco a poco.
- ALF: vale, pues, so tell me, \*\*Oscar, e have you used English on your previous experience? Work experience?
- OSC: e:, not yet. At the moment e:, I, I, I working in Spanish or Catalan, and I didn't need the, the English. But, err, for me it's good that the:, e: job, the next job e:, included the, the the English skills because it's it's good for me e:, also.
- ALF: alright, maybe in previous jobs e, did you e have e: communication with e: another providers or customers or other stuff of the?
- OSC: not, not. Not much. But it's true that in, in, I need to download information, data sheets or another things to, to get an information, ok? E:, I, I need, the: reading comprehension e:, only for download steps or another things to, to, to make a job, only this.
- ALF: alright, technical documentation. Vale, perfecto \*\*Oscar, muy bien. Jajaja, te ha salido con, está bien.
- OSC: jaja, es que tío, cuesta un poquillo, cuesta un poquillo, y voy a hacer, estoy haciendo grupos de conversa, y yo creo que en unos meses voy a hacer un poquito más de, porque el hablado es lo que más cuesta.
- ALF: bueno, sobre todo si, como dices, si no lo utilizas en el día a día, al final e:, es algo que, que queda ahí. Que no lo utilizas. En este caso te pregunto el tema del inglés no porque vayas a estar hablando en inglés todo el día, sino por el tema de la documentación técnica que ya conocerás, pues la persona tiene que saber interpretarlo, lo que tú decías descargar información y demás, va más por ahí, ¿no? este inglés técnico de ingeniería pero no a nivel oral superfluido y super alto que no, no te falta.
- OSC: hombre, si fuera un nivel oral, también me iría bien para, para coger para ir aprendiendo o sea sería un empujón más para ir aprendiendo inglés. E:, aunque entiendo que eso hay que hacerlo fuera del trabajo, pero bueno que tampoco me asusta vaya

## Translation of Extract 7.21

- ALF: *On the technical side, at the language level? What level would you say you have right now, \*\*Oscar?*
- OSC: *in English I'm at a, I am studying English, I am doing B1 right now. Now next year I could go for the First.*
- ALF: *ok*
- OSC: *but now I am in B1. I keep doing it, yeah, yeah. Haha.*
- ALF: *ok. How would you do at the level of understanding technical documentation, at the written level, at the oral level?*
- OSC: *orally, well, it would cost a little bit more but written and so on and reading good, even listening good. Now I can speak and understand conversations at a basic level,*
- ALF: *uhuh*
- OSC: *little by little I am learning English too. Yes. I am working on it.*
- ALF: *okay, we could have a little conversation in English to see how you manage a little bit? Just to see the level. Don't you be scared.*
- OSC: *well, ok, let's, but well, I am telling you, well, little by little.*
- ALF: *ok, so tell me, \*\*Oscar, have you used English on your previous experience? Work experience?*
- OSC: *e:, not yet. At the moment e:, I, I, I, I working in Spanish or Catalan, and I didn't need the, the English. But, err, for me it's good that the:, job, the next job e:, included the, the the English skills because it's it's good for me err, also.*
- ALF: *alright, maybe in previous jobs e:, did you e: have e: communication with e: another providers or customers or other stuff of the?*
- OSC: *not, not. Not much. But it's true that in, in, in, I need to download information, data sheets or another things to, to get an information, ok? e:, I, I need, the: reading comprehension e:, only for download steps or another things to, to, to make a job, only this.*
- ALF: *alright, technical documentation. Okay, perfect \*\*Oscar, very good. Hahaha, you've come up with, okay.*
- OSC: *haha, I tell you, it costs a little bit, it costs and I am going to, I am doing conversation groups, and I think that in months I am going to do a little bit more, because the spoken one is the one that costs the most.*
- ALF: *well, especially if, as you say, if you do not use it every day, in the end it's something that stays there. That you don't use it. In this case I am asking you about English, not because you are going to be speaking English all day, but because of the technical documentation that you already know, because the person has to know how to interpret it, what you were saying about downloading information and also, it is about that, right? It is technical engineering English but not at a super fluent and super high oral level, no, you do not lack it.*
- OSC: *well, if it was the spoken level, it would also be good for me to, to learn English. Although I understand that you have to do it outside of work, but it does not scare me either, I am not scared.*

Interview observation, IT Power, candidate Oscar, 27/03/2019

Candidate Mark frames the entirety of his experience with learning English skills in terms of “bad” decisions and “lucky” work circumstances. He reflexively regrets not having made the “right” decision to study English during his university years. Mark also believes that university was meant to provide him with the necessary training. He also

frames his further work experience and the possibility of practicing English on the job as a “lucky” circumstance which provided him with an advantage. This view shows that the candidate blames himself for his inability to acquire the skills while absolving companies and formal education of any responsibility.

### **Extract 7.22**

MAR: I never lived abroad. Er, when I was studying the degree unfortunately I took the wrong decision to not study English and leave it for after finishing the degree, e: for my part it was a bad decision but er hopefully er I was able to study, I was studied, I was studying for, I studied on the third level so it was three years studying English. And I was lucky because in all the the companies where I was working, English was, maybe not required 100 %, but daily when you speak English with English customers, all the technical documentation coming in English, or most of the project, so you are practicing and this is an advantage compared to the people that is just studying on the school, you have also when you got to the professional life, you also use the English for that daily. So, it’s an advantage from my point of view.

Interview observation, candidate Mark, Spencer Senior, 08/10/2018

Candidate Peter, a Junior Controller, is a contrast to the example above, as he blames the company for bad work conditions and for their failure to provide English skills training that was promised. This information is disclosed at the interview before the recruiter even asks the candidate about his English skills. The candidate has decided to invest in English in order to be able to broaden his work opportunities; that is, to apply for more jobs, especially the jobs that involve international projects. He is also thinking of going abroad and searching for job opportunities there as he sees that the salary he receives in Spain is rather low. When this candidate is asked about his English, he is gets straight to what the recruiter would like to know: his ability to communicate.

### **Extract 7.23**

ALF: Es para conocer tu perfil profesional, yo veo que estás como contable  
PET: no:, ahora estoy como Controller.  
ALF: he localizado tu candidatura de Infojobs.  
PET: controller en empresa de tecnología, no estoy muy contento aquí, y estoy buscando nuevo,  
ALF: qué es lo que no te gustaba,  
PET: el salario, de verdad,  
ALF: ¿cuánto cobras?  
PET: 25. Cuando empecé, me esperaba otra cosa, tenía que hablar inglés .... prometieron cursillos de Ingles, y no lo han dado, a nivel de beneficios sociales no estaba contento  
ALF: genial, veo que a nivel de idiomas... ¿inglés B2?

- PET: sí, y ahora un poco más, y estos meses estaba haciendo clases particulares. La comunicación, con esto no voy a tener mucho problema. He tenido comunicación con Alemania, y también pienso irme al extranjero, estoy estudiando para advanced.
- ALF: tell me something about your current job
- PET: something?
- ALF: something about your current job
- PET: I have been involved in the... xxx, tomorrow is my last day in my job and, I don't know,
- ALF: alright... Why did you decide to improve your English?
- PET: It was important to be comfortable to focus on communication, to be able to work in international companies, because now I was only able to focus on national companies.

### Translation of Extract 7.23

- ALF: *It's to check your professional profile, I see that you are an accountant.*
- PET: *no;, I am now a Controller*
- ALF: *I have found your application from Infojobs.*
- PET: *Controller in a technology company, I am not very happy here, and I am looking for a new one.*
- ALF: *what is it that you did not like.*
- PET: *salary, really.*
- ALF: *how much do you earn.*
- PET: *25. When I started, I expected something else, I had to speak English .... they promised English courses, and they didn't give it, in terms of social benefits I was not happy.*
- ALF: *great, I see that the language level... English B2?*
- PET: *yes, and now a bit more, and these months I was doing private lessons. Communication, with this I won't have much of a problem. I have had communication with Germany, and I also plan to go abroad, I am studying for Advanced.*
- ALF: tell me something about your current job.
- PET: something? (The candidate must have had difficulty understanding even though Alfredo said this phrase slowly and very distinctly)
- ALF: something about your current job.
- PET: I have been involved in the ...xxxx, tomorrow is my last day in my job and, I don't know.
- ALF: alright... Why did you decide to improve your English?
- PET: it was important to be comfortable to focus on communication, to be able to work in international companies, because now I was only able to focus on national companies.

Interview, candidate Peter, Spencer Junior, March 15/03/2018

This section outlined the way candidates evaluate their own English skills at interviews and how their insufficient level makes them uncomfortable when being evaluated by means of a short conversation. The candidates try to present themselves as strongly motivated and interested in improving their English skills. However, they also admit to a lack of communicative ability. The candidates understand that using English on the job will give them an advantage as well as a chance to improve their English and, hence their work opportunities.

## Conclusions

The central concern of this dissertation has been to understand and unpack the processes underlying the contingency of access to work on the English skills requirement in Spain. This study has taken a critical ethnographic approach by looking at recruitment agencies as agents that simultaneously construct the English skills requirement and guard access to highly qualified junior and senior level jobs. The role ascribed to English skills in recruitment has been explicated with the help of three research questions that examine the construction of the English skills criterion, the recruitment practices of screening and evaluation on the basis of the English requirement, and the recruitment experiences of candidates that shed light on the effect of recruitment practices.

The first research question has examined the rationalities behind the construction of the English skills requirement at recruitment agencies. In line with the public and commercial discourses that surround English skills in Spain, recruiters have identified that there is a gap between the high level of English desired by client firms and the absence of this level among the Spanish labour force. This gap, however, has is produced by the structural conditions of the labour market, treatment of English as an economic asset by companies, and the hiring and recruitment practices (Cappelli, 2012) stemming from this logic.

The scarcity of candidates with English skills is linked companies' inability to offer the salaries that these types of profiles would find attractive. In such cases, cheaper profiles can be drawn from the non-Spanish candidate pool of international workers who are already in possession of English. In the Spanish context, it is particularly difficult to find profiles with English in places where there is general scarcity of highly qualified professionals. Therefore, in these cases, the skills gap refers to deficiencies in the workers' professional qualifications rather than their English. Moreover, a high spoken level of English is required of professionals who did not and do not need English skills on the job.

In order to find out the reason why English skills are in high demand, the types of businesses that were emerging in Barcelona in the years 2017-2019 and offering jobs were investigated in closer detail. As Catalonia was offering appealing grant incentives and tax benefits to encourage companies to come and settle in Barcelona—with the

intention of boosting the economy and tackling high unemployment—multinational companies took the bait and created the types of business models that rely on English skills as well as skills in other languages. Companies could cover operations for different regions in the world while being located in Spain. The possibilities of finding highly qualified professionals among the Spanish labour force were tested. Ultimately, however, there were not enough people with the necessary professional qualifications, nor did the members of the Spanish labour force possess enough language and cultural capital in order to be in constant work contact with multiple regions worldwide. Workers that found Barcelona an appealing place to live were brought from other countries. This resulted in increased workplace diversity, which had to be managed with the help of corporate English skills policies.

The businesses that settled in Barcelona help the overall Spanish economy, but they do not provide the Spanish workforce with jobs. The logic of such businesses depends on the ideologies they seed about (1) the positive aspects of living abroad and (2) framing language skills as an economic asset for individuals when they actually help businesses follow the logic of profit-maximization. While making workers invest in language skills, companies can extract the surplus value from them (Holborow, 2018). Promotion of international experiences helps corporations move people to the parts of the world where they—the corporations—profit most.

The jobs that indeed require a high level of English exist in Barcelona, but they are not the majority of jobs. However, the requirement for English is ubiquitous in the job announcements for junior and senior level jobs posted by recruitment agencies. This ubiquity stems from a recruitment practice that has its own rationale for establishing the English language criterion. In other words, a significant part of the English skill gap is actually the consequence of the inflated language requirement. In order to explain this phenomenon, which is orchestrated by recruitment agencies in collaboration with client firms, the terms exchange value and use value (Urciuoli, 2008) were appropriated. In the context of this study, exchange value has been understood as workers exchanging their skills for a job or a salary. The term use value has been understood with reference to workers actually needing and using (or not) their skills on the job. While the value for English, as presented in job announcements, seems to and should represent the exchange value and the use value combined (i.e., the requirement for English is included



in announcements because these skills are needed for jobs), the value that recruiters attach to the requirement is split into two different sets of meanings. Recruiters have inside knowledge about companies' operations and workers' job tasks, and they are able to deduce when clients are asking for English skills with no justified reason. However, they do add English to the requirements because it is what their client wants. It is equally true that even if the client does not ask for a candidate with English skills, recruiters take initiative and add it to the list of requirements anyway. The types of companies which always seek candidates with English are mainly multinational corporations, although the requirement is also present in local Catalan firms. The arguments that recruiters employ in order to legitimize including a requirement that is, in essence, an added value, revolve around firms being multinational or internationalizing. Recruiters invoke language of probability and chance of communication/correspondence with the headquarters or subsidiaries, which, as has been demonstrated throughout this thesis, is a constructed recruitment discourse that helps them to rationalize their practice and justify the requirement for the candidate. While recruiters acknowledge that English is "a plus" for most jobs, they are not fully aware of their responsibility for, and the consequences of, having set up an unjustified requirement.

Recruitment agencies are also in charge of the construction of value that translates into monetary benefits for individuals. They have established a price for English, an amount of money that is awarded to candidates with English, or other language skills if those are required too. This price value can be recommended to a person with a minimum of B2 English skill level, which is what recruiters understand as "fluent English". In setting up a price for English, recruiters incentivize job-seekers to acquire this language. Companies, however, are not always prepared to pay extra money for English skills, or for profiles with English skills that are more expensive to hire because of their other professional qualifications. After all, firms always seek cost efficiency. Recruiters benefit in both cases—if companies are willing to pay for English skills, recruiters earn their agreed-upon commission, and if companies do not want to pay, recruiters can always recommend another, cheaper, candidate. Therefore, English skills are used by recruiters in a flexible way.

Finally, the first research question has looked into the value created for other languages besides English. The three most required languages in the Spanish labour

market are French, German, and Italian. These languages are always assigned an inferior value in comparison to English skills. These language skills are neither verified by means of an oral evaluation at interviews, nor is a high level of competence expected of candidates, with the exception of a few cases where a second foreign language is an essential skill and it is, therefore, needed to carry out actual job tasks. While the emergence of shared service centres in Barcelona has generated more demand for second foreign language skills, typically these skills are requested because the company has a European headquarters or because a team has European boss. In Spain, candidates with two European languages are scarce, and if high proficiency is required in both languages, such profiles are typically found among candidates of non-Spanish origins. If second foreign language skills are required of candidates in the form of symbolic added value, such a criterion may be dropped unless candidates with such skills are found. The candidate with second foreign language skills will be prioritized in the recruitment process where the second foreign language is an added value.

The second research question has examined the screening and evaluation practices related to English skills. The gap that recruitment agencies have created by establishing a high English skills criterion for jobs in which the language is not required has become nearly impossible to overcome. By simultaneously imposing the requirement on the job-seekers and evaluating their skills in a way that ensures that their investments in English fall short, recruiters have created a social boundary—a line between candidates who are deemed eligible for a job and those who aren't. Recruiters have created an “English Divide” (Terasawa, 2017), that separates people who can get better jobs because of English and those who cannot. Such a practice represents a system that reproduces social inequality.

The need to choose people on the basis of English is, in part, conditioned by the recruitment business model. It makes recruiters seek ways to give the clients what they want or need, as the success of recruitment agencies is contingent on the fees received from their clients. In that sense, recruiters are not matching real work needs with candidates' qualifications. This places candidates at a disadvantage not only in terms of finding a job, but also it creates an artificial objective that favours the interests of language academies that teach English. As a result, an idealized labour market that does not fit reality is constructed. Recruitment agencies have elaborated tools and

techniques that help them predict which candidates will have the most success with clients. Also, their individual experiences aid in formulating strategies and principles of work that are efficient and yield good results. In this thesis, I have argued that English skills have become a predictor of a profile of a candidate that fits in the constructed version of the Spanish labour market that is controlled by recruiters. English skills have also become a work optimization tool that recruiters use to sort through the multitudes of CVs that arrive at their agencies—a consequence of high unemployment and the job insecurity associated with temporary contracts, which comprise the majority of all Spanish jobs.

One way to understand why and how recruiters have ended up creating a selection pattern that is based on English skills was to trace the logic of individual recruiters in how they manage their communication with clients. It has been found that two important communications with the client take place: first, when the job description is reworked into a job announcement, and second, when clients reject or accept the candidates provided by the recruiter. It was during that second communication when clients would typically reject the candidates on the basis of English. Due to the nature of the relationship between the client and the recruiter and the complexity of the recruitment process itself—where decision-making in hiring depends on multiple agents (Gershon, 2017)—recruiters had no way of knowing whether candidates had been rejected on the basis of English. However, in those cases, they were obliged to start the selection process over again, after adjusting the selection criteria for English. The accumulated effect of these rejections and the unaffordability of being inefficient in the highly time-sensitive recruitment environment has led the recruiters to anticipate clients' wishes. It has also led to practices in which using English skills in screening and evaluation became an established routine that is taken for granted by the recruiters, justified by the added value rhetoric and legitimized by the clients' order for better English skills.

Automated screening tools are of help for recruiters as they save time by not having to sort through CVs manually. These automated tools are set up by recruiters so that the résumés sort themselves out as job applicants apply for jobs online. The English skills killer question parameter has been consistently used by recruiters in order to select for CVs that have the highest English level marked on them. Recruiters are aware that there

might be differences as to how job applicants and recruiters understand and report on their English skills level, but this is considered only if there are no other available applicants. In which case, the English skills parameter could be lowered. In that sense, recruiters use English as a flexible tool to be readjusted in accordance with the supply side of the candidate pool. The criteria for different levels of rank and seniority are also distinct. Those are the junior and senior profiles that are screened and evaluated the most rigorously on the basis of English. By contrast, the high rank or executive profiles are deemed more trustworthy, and therefore, they are subjected to less English screening and evaluation, or at least to less exigency in the levels that workers are expected to have.

The recruitment pattern on the basis of English skills is reinforced as recruiters continue to evaluate English during the following stages of selection: phone-screening and interviews. Evaluations are done within the competence-based framework and the framework of soft and hard skills. Short oral conversations in English are held during each interview by a recruiter, whose authority and competence to evaluate English are in question. These evaluations are spontaneous as they can begin at any time during the interview, they are not consistent across a single selection process, and they are highly subjective. Fluency serves as a point of reference, a desired proficiency that in the eyes of the recruiter is a sufficient language competence. Fluency, a highly problematic parameter that does not seem to yield ground for comparison, is equalled with the language competence at interviews. This means that English skills are not evaluated as a technical or hard skill, but more as a communication skill or soft skill, that represents a candidate fit for recruiters. It is not surprising, that these skills are not checked in terms of their use function, as it has been established that English, in fact, is an added value for most jobs. This type of evaluation aids the purpose given to English skills in recruitment, which consists in keeping social boundaries intact and providing a selection mechanism that works across all jobs and sectors.

Finally, the reason for companies to set the English requirement is to limit selection to the kinds of profiles they would like to hire. It has been found that companies ask of recruiters to provide them with younger candidates with English skills when they want to rejuvenate staff. International work experience is another profile feature that companies are after. The logic of firms that require English skills consists in them

legitimizing the hiring of younger profiles through the English requirement, as they believe that young people know English better. The economic value of English skills for companies, in this case, consists in them being able to hire junior profiles that are cheaper. Consequently, the choice of candidate is determined not by his or her professional qualifications but by an English skill which outweighs these qualifications and potentially undermines the quality of work.

The third research question of this thesis focused on the recruitment experiences of candidates in order to trace the ways in which their work trajectories have been affected by the English skills requirement. The labour market conditions in Spain changed drastically after the crisis of 2008. The temporary nature of work, job insecurity, and high unemployment have been following workers for nearly a decade since the crisis had struck.

The candidates have noticed that English has become a requirement for most jobs, as compared to the pre-crisis conditions when it was not such a compulsory requirement. The structural problems of the Spanish labour market, such as the inability to provide stable employment in the form of permanent contracts, have created a need to design selection mechanisms that define the criteria for who gets a job. The English skills requirement has become one such mechanism. Candidates with several recruitment experiences and who have spent time trying to get a job, realized that the requirement for English skills was not necessarily linked to the jobs per se, but rather it was related to the operation of recruitment agencies that, as some candidates have stated, were receiving a million CVs that they needed to sort through. The possibility of finding a job also depends on the way job-seekers make sense of job requirements and how they act upon them. Job-seekers understood that their options to find jobs were limited by the English language requirement, but some of them had no choice other than to apply for a job. Their personal work experiences were also the proof that they did not need a very high level of English to carry out their work. Hence, some candidates started to subvert the English requirement, and some of these attempts resulted in success.

Among the job-seekers who were attempting to gain access to jobs were those who had studied English at schools, universities, and private language academies. Some even spent summers in Britain when they were younger. These people found themselves

unable to get jobs with the English they already had, as their skills were undergoing decapitalization. They signed up for English classes at private language academies in order to improve their employability. The job-seekers adopted, or rather were socialized into, a neoliberal logic of skills investment that they did not necessarily buy into. This action did not result in success because of the evaluation practices that were designed so that candidates were not evaluated based on the technical English skills they would need to actually carry out the jobs. The investment of time and money spent on English classes did not work out as these candidates' job opportunities were still limited by the English requirement that also masked the absence of jobs for everyone. The material gain that candidates were promised for English would only come true if the candidates had gotten the jobs.

Formal education is often blamed for not providing workers with the English skills they seemingly need. It is true that most individuals end up making private investments in English skills because public schools and universities do not help Spanish citizens to acquire the fluency desired by companies. However, the question of whether education should or should not provide job-seekers with English should be redirected towards the role this requirement actually performs and whether English would still be a requirement for access to work if more jobs were available. Also, we should question what kinds of jobs are provided by the companies who need Spanish citizens to have these skills and why such companies do not provide the necessary training for workers.

The candidates who undergo oral evaluation of English skills at interviews demonstrate that they are taking full responsibility for self-skilling outside of their jobs. They also see clear advantages to being able to acquire or improve their English at work, as it gives them a promise of better work opportunities. The candidates who lack the required fluency experience anxiety at interviews, not because their English is not good, but because—as we have seen—this requirement defines whether they get or do not get the job.

This thesis shows that the English skills requirement is the consequence of the structural and systemic problems in the Spanish labour market such as high unemployment and a large share of fixed-term contracts. The recruitment agencies' selection pattern limits job opportunities for good candidates who could have otherwise been invaluable workers, in order to help the companies to maximize their profits by

hiring the younger and cheaper staff. The English requirement is the reason for the inequality that consists in distinguishing workers by their English skills regardless of their use on the job and providing access to jobs only to those who know it better.

Over the course of two years, I collected sufficient data which allowed me to examine recruitment practices in relation to the English skills requirement. One of the limitations of this thesis is defined by the spaces and activities I was able to gain access to, and consequently, the types of data collected. I analysed the relationship between recruiters and client firms through the recruiters' perspective on it and their reports of what the clients' requirements were and how they communicated with recruiters. However, it would have been ideal to observe real communication and negotiation between the recruiter and the client firm. Furthermore, my research focused on recruitment practices rather than on selection processes. I observed the daily routines of recruiters that consist of multiple tasks that are carried out daily for all the selection processes they work on. Because each selection process develops differently and takes a different amount of time, it was not always possible to trace what happened before and after the interviews or phone and CV screening for each process. This data could have expanded my knowledge and provided further insights into the consequences of recruiters' practices.

Further research into recruitment could zoom in on the relationship between the recruiter and the client firm and explore the part of the selection process that takes place on the premises of client firms. In order to do that, I propose finding a firm that is growing or setting up a new business, and therefore, hiring a lot of workers. Some firms employ recruiters from recruitment agencies in order to manage the search of new staff. Accessing a firm of this type would allow us to explore the relationship between the hiring manager, the in-house recruiter that is carrying out selection processes, and the human resources department officers, all of whom have an impact on hiring decisions. Alternatively, a human resources department of a large multinational firm that is opening up a new business line could be accessed to explore how English skills are evaluated and what weight they have for hiring decisions. This kind of research would also shed light on how English skills are evaluated by companies. Another possible line of research would be to gather more interview data on job-seekers who are studying English at private language academies. It would be important to include data on their

social background in order to examine whether the category of class is related to their English skills and employability. Finally, I propose a study of recruitment through career services at business universities. Analysis of the role of English skills in recruitment for graduates from these prestigious universities can help us understand the paradigms of elite recruitment.



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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Transcription Conventions

/ rising intonation	, short pause and continuing intonation
\ falling intonation	. short pause and finishing idea
xxx incomplete passage of information	(.) short pause
a: lengthening of a sound	(:) longer pause
[] overlap	** anonymised fragment
= latching	inter- self-interruption
... continuing intonation	<u>very</u> emphasis on the word
() remarks made by the authors	? question directed to the interlocutor
(...) text omitted	@ smiling when talking
<i>cursive</i> translation from the original into English	! cheerful tone

## Appendix B: Project Information Sheets and Consent Forms

### Project Information Sheets

**UAB**

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#### Project Information Sheet

**Project title:** Multilingual Practices in Recruiting Processes.

**Funded by:** Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad (Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competition FFI2015-67232-C3-1-P Principal investigator: Joan Pujolar Cos)

**Researchers:** Melissa Moyer (Project leader), Gema Rubio Carbonero, Hanna Klimava, -Departament de Filologia Anglesa i Germanística, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

**Contact address:** Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres (Edifici B), Departament de Filologia Anglesa i Germanística, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 08193 Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallés).

**Contact Telephone:** 686 481256/ 93 581 2326

#### About the project:

The aim of this study is to look into processes of recruitment, which take place at multinational recruitment agencies. More specifically, we are interested in the role of language (foreign language skills) and communicative skills in selection processes. Therefore, our main interest lies in the candidates and interviews with people whose profiles and CVs need to meet language requirements, proposed by the job positions the candidates are applying for. In addition, the project seeks to understand how language skills are evaluated.

This project also sets a goal to define what types jobs are offered on local and international level within the framework of neoliberal economy which comprises enhanced mobility and dominating presence of service sector.

#### Project description and data collection:

This is an ethnographic study, in which the researcher will have to be present at a recruitment office during a limited number of hours (negotiated by the parties) observing processes of staff selection and collecting other types of data related to the processes of the recruitment. In particular, we will be carrying out observations with and without participation, interviews with relevant people involved in the selection process, and gather documentary information on ways to assess the language skills of job applicants.

Data will be collected during a between a period of six months up to one year on a weekly or bi-weekly basis (one or two days a week for three or four hours a week), according to the convenience for your company.

The responsible for collecting the data will be Hanna Klimava.

This research has already been approved by the Ethics Committee of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

#### How will the data be handled?

The name of the company and persons participating in the study will be treated anonymously by the research team.



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Participation in this research is completely voluntary and can be discontinued at any stage of the project, even if a person has previously accepted to participate.

The oral data collected will be transcribed and participants will be given the opportunity to review and correct any of the content.

All the information and data collected for this project will be accessible to the research team alone and it will not be shared with other people, companies, or organizations. The data collected will be used only for the purposes of this project and subsequent publications or conference presentations. In no case will data be exploited for commercial purposes.

**For further information about the project:**

Main Researcher: Melissa G. Moyer, E-mail: [melissa.moyer@uab.cat](mailto:melissa.moyer@uab.cat)

Researchers:

Hanna Klimava, E-mails: [hanna.klimava@uab.cat](mailto:hanna.klimava@uab.cat) / [appleakn@gmail.com](mailto:appleakn@gmail.com)

Gema Rubio Carbonero, E-mail: [gema.rubio@uab.cat](mailto:gema.rubio@uab.cat)

Website with more information: <http://groupcien.uab.es/english/index.html>



Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

### Ficha de Información del Proyecto

**Título del proyecto:** Prácticas multilingües en procesos de selección de personal.

**Entidad Financiadora:** Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad FFI2015-67232-C3-1-P Principal investigador: Joan Pujolar Cos, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya.

**Investigadoras:** Melissa Moyer (Líder del proyecto), Gema Rubio Carbonero, Hanna Klimava, - Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística. Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

**Dirección de contacto:** Facultat de Filosofia y Lletres (Edifici B). Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística. 08193 Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès). Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. a

**Teléfono de contacto:** 686 481256/ 93 581 2326

#### Acerca del proyecto:

El objetivo de este estudio es investigar acerca de los procesos de reclutamiento que tienen lugar en las empresas de selección del personal multinacionales. Más específicamente, estamos interesados en el papel de la lengua (la competencia lingüística en lenguas extranjeras) además de las habilidades comunicativas en los procesos de selección de personal. Por lo tanto, nuestro principal interés reside en los candidatos y las entrevistas con gente cuyos perfiles y currículums necesitan cumplir con los requisitos de competencia lingüística especificadas en el anuncio del puesto al cual los candidatos aspiran. Adicionalmente, el proyecto busca entender cómo los conocimientos lingüísticos son evaluados.

Este proyecto tiene también como objetivo entender qué tipos de empleos se ofrecen a nivel local e internacional dentro del marco del mercado laboral dominada por una economía neoliberal que incluye movilidad aumentada y la presencia dominante del sector servicios.

#### Descripción del proyecto y recogida de datos:

Este es un estudio etnográfico, en el cual el investigador tendrá que estar presente en una oficina de la empresa de reclutamiento durante un número limitado de horas (negociado por las partes) observando procesos de selección de personal y recogiendo otros tipos de datos relacionados con los procesos de reclutamiento. En particular estaremos llevando a cabo observaciones con y sin participación, entrevistas con personas relevantes involucradas en el proceso de selección, y reunir información documental sobre maneras de evaluar habilidades de idiomas de los aspirantes a empleos.

Los datos serán recogidos durante un período de entre seis meses y un año cada semana o cada dos semanas (uno o dos días por semana durante tres o cuatro horas por semana), según convenga a su compañía.

La responsable de recoger los datos será Hanna Klimava.



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Esta propuesta de estudio ya ha sido aprobado al Comité Ético de la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

**¿Cómo serán tratados los datos?**

El nombre de la compañía así como de las personas que participen en el estudio serán tratados anónimamente por el equipo de investigación.

Su participación en este estudio es voluntaria y puede darse de baja en cualquier momento de su realización, incluso si ha aceptado previamente participar.

Las entrevistas y las grabaciones recogidas serán transcritas por los investigadores y se dará la oportunidad a los participantes en el estudio de revisar y corregir cualquier contenido.

La información y datos recogidos para este proyecto sólo serán accesibles al equipo de investigación y no será compartida con otras personas, compañías u organizaciones. Los datos obtenidos serán usados solo para los propósitos de este proyecto y publicaciones posteriores o presentaciones en conferencias. En ningún caso los datos serán explotados con propósitos comerciales.

**Para más información acerca del proyecto:**

Líder del proyecto: Melissa Moyer, E-mail: [melissa.moyer@uab.cat](mailto:melissa.moyer@uab.cat)

Investigadoras:

Hanna Klimava, E-mails: [hanna.klimava@uab.cat](mailto:hanna.klimava@uab.cat) / [appleakn@gmail.com](mailto:appleakn@gmail.com)

Gema Rubio Carbonero, E-mail: [gema.rubio@uab.cat](mailto:gema.rubio@uab.cat)

Sitio web con más información: <http://groupcien.uab.es/english/index.html>



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### Fitxa d'Informació de Projecte

**Títol del projecte:** Pràctiques multilingües en processos de selecció de personal.

**Entitat Financadora:** Ministeri d'Economia i Competitivitat FFI2015-67232-C3-1-P  
Investigador principal: Joan Pujolar Cos, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya.

**Investigadores:** Melissa Moyer (Líder del projecte), Gema Rubio Carbonero, Hanna Klimava - Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística. 08193 Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès). Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

**Adreça de contacte:** Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres (Edifici B). Departament de Filologia Anglesa. 08193 Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès). Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

**Telèfon de contacte:** 686 481256/ 93 581 2326

#### Sobre el projecte:

L'objectiu d'aquest estudi és investigar sobre els processos de reclutament que tenen lloc als empreses de selecció del personal multinacionals. Més específicament, estem interessats en el paper de la llengua (la competència lingüística en llengües estrangeres) a més de les habilitats comunicatives als processos de selecció de personal. Per tant, el nostre principal interès rau en els candidats i les entrevistes amb gent amb perfils i currículums que han de complir amb els requisits de competència lingüística especificats a l'anunci del lloc de treball al qual els candidats aspiren. Addicionalment, el projecte busca comprendre com els coneixements lingüístics són avaluats

Aquest projecte té també com a objectiu comprendre quins tipus de llocs de treball són oferts a nivell local e internacional dins del marc del mercat laboral dominat per una economia neoliberal que inclou mobilitat augmentada i la presència dominant del sector serveis.

#### Descripció del projecte i recollida de dades:

Aquest és un estudi etnogràfic, en el qual l'investigador haurà d'estar present en una oficina de reclutament durant un nombre limitat d'hores (negociat per ambdues parts) observant processos de selecció de personal i recollint altres tipus de dades relacionades amb els processos de reclutament. En particular estarem d'entendre a terme observacions amb i sense participació, entrevistes amb persones rellevants involucrades en el procés de selecció, i reunint informació documental sobre maneres d'avaluar habilitats d'idiomes dels aspirants a llocs de treball.

Les dades seran recollides durant un període d'entre sis mesos i un any cada setmana o cada dues setmanes (un o dos dies per setmana durant tres o quatre hores per setmana), segons convingui a la seva companyia.

El responsable de recollir les dades serà Hanna Klimava.

Aquesta proposta d'estudi ja ha estat aprovada pel Comitè Ètic de la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.



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**Com seran tractades les dades?**

El nom de la companyia així com el de les persones que participin en l'estudi seran tractades anònimament per l'equip d'investigació.

La seva participació en aquest estudi és completament voluntària i vostè es pot donar de baixa en qualsevol moment de la seva realització, fins i tot si ha acceptat prèviament participar.

Les entrevistes i dades recollides seran transcrites pels investigadors i es donarà l'oportunitat als participants a l'estudi de revisar i corregir qualsevol contingut.

L'informació i dades recollides per aquest projecte seran accessibles només per l'equip d'investigació i no serà compartida amb altres persones, companyies u organitzacions. Les dades obtingudes seran utilitzades només per als propòsits d'aquest projecte i posteriors publicacions o presentacions en conferències. En cap cas les dades seran explotades amb propòsits comercials.

**Per més informació sobre el projecte:**

Líder del projecte: Melissa G. Moyer, E-mail: [melissa.moyer@uab.cat](mailto:melissa.moyer@uab.cat)

Investigadores:

Hanna Klimava, E-mails: [hanna.klimava@uab.cat](mailto:hanna.klimava@uab.cat) / [appleakn@gmail.com](mailto:appleakn@gmail.com)

Gema Rubio Carbonero, E-mail: [gema.rubio@uab.cat](mailto:gema.rubio@uab.cat)

Lloc web amb més informació: <http://groupcien.uab.es/english/index.html>

## Consent Form

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### Consent Form

**Research project title:** Multilingual practices in recruiting processes

**Principal investigator:** Melissa Greer Moyer

**Research Participants name:** Hanna Klimava, Gema Rubio Carbonero

The research will take place from April 2017 to July 2019. We don't anticipate there being any risks associated with your participation, but you have the right to stop or withdraw from the research at any time.

Thank you for agreeing to take part in the above research project. Ethical procedures for academic research require that participants explicitly agree to participate and to how the data collected will be used. This consent form is necessary for us to ensure that you understand the purpose of your involvement and that you agree to the conditions of your participation. Please read the accompanying **information sheet**, and then sign this form to certify that you agree to the following:

- Observations and interviews will be recorded, and a transcript will be produced.
- You will be sent the transcript and given the opportunity to review any of its content.
- The transcripts and fieldnotes will be analysed by the three researchers mentioned above.
- Access to data collected will be limited to the three researchers and academic colleagues and researchers with whom they might collaborate as part of the research process.
- Any content that is made available through academic publication or other academic outlets will be anonymized so that you cannot be identified, and care will be taken to ensure that other information that could identify yourself is not revealed.
- Any alteration of the conditions above will only occur with your further explicit approval

### **Quotation Agreement**

**I also understand that my words may be quoted directly. With regards to being quoted, please initial next to any of the statements that you agree with:**

<input type="checkbox"/>	I wish to review the notes, transcripts, or other data collected during the research pertaining to my participation.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I agree to be quoted directly.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I agree to be quoted directly if my name is not published and a made-up name (pseudonym) is used.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I agree that the researchers may publish documents that contain quotations by me.





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All or part of the data collected may be used:

- in academic papers or news articles;
- on our website and in other media that we may produce such as spoken presentations;
- on other feedback events; and
- in an archive of the project.

By signing this form, I agree that:

1. I am voluntarily taking part in this project. I understand that I don't have to take part, and I can stop at any time;
2. the data collected may be used as described above;
3. I have read the Information sheet;
4. I don't expect to receive any benefit or payment for my participation;
5. I can request a copy of the transcripts and may make edits I feel necessary to ensure the effectiveness of any agreement made about confidentiality; and
6. I have been able to ask any questions I might have, and I understand that I am free to contact the researcher with any questions I may have in the future.

#### **Contact Information**

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona Research Ethics Board. If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please contact:

Name of researcher: Melissa Moyer  
Full address: Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres (Edifici B). Departament de Filologia Anglesa i Germanística, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. 08193 Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallés).  
Tel: 686481256/ 93 581 2326  
E-mail: [Melissa.Moyer@uab.cat](mailto:Melissa.Moyer@uab.cat)

You can also contact:

Name of researcher: Gema Rubio Carbonero  
Tel: 646601853  
E-mail: [Gema.Rubio@uab.cat](mailto:Gema.Rubio@uab.cat)

Name of researcher: Hanna Klimava  
Tel: 645429912  
E-mail: [Hanna.Klimava@uab.cat](mailto:Hanna.Klimava@uab.cat) / [appleakn@gmail.com](mailto:appleakn@gmail.com)

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Participants Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Researchers Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

### Appendix C: Fieldwork Visits

No.	Date of the Observation	Fieldwork Activity	Participants	Time
1	April 18, 2017	Interview with a candidate	Joel	22:28
2	April 19, 2017	Interview with a candidate	Elizabeth	N/R
3	April 26, 2017	Interview with a candidate	Dalia	53:25
4	April 26, 2017	Interview with a candidate	Celia	45:39
5	April 27, 2017	Interview with a candidate	Alejandro	01:07:40
6	May 5, 2017	Interview with a candidate	Jordi, Student	24:03
7	May 8, 2017	Interview with a candidate	Patricia	21:49
8	May 9, 2017	Interview with a recruiter	Paula (Spencer)	01:59:51
9	June 30, 2017	Interview with a recruiter	Nuria (Williams)	01:04:09
10	August 1, 2017	Interview with a recruiter	Monica (Johnson)	01:01:15
11	September 26, 2017	Interview with a candidate	Marina	20:05
12	October 3, 2017	Meeting with a Managing Recruiter	Emily (Johnson)	N/R
13	October 5, 2017	Interview with an owner of a headhunting agency	Odelia (Smith)	58:27
14	October 10 - 16, 2017	Phone calls with headhunting agency	Wilson	N/R
15	October 10, 2017	Interview at a headhunting agency for an internship	Alex (Wilson)	N/R
16	October 25, 2017	Interview observation Spencer Junior	Recruiter: Paula Candidate: David	44:11
17	October 25, 2017	Interview with a recruiter	Melanie (Spencer)	31:42
18	October 26, 2017	Interview observation at Spencer Junior	Recruiter: Maribel Candidate: Pol	45:28
19	October 26, 2017	Interview with a candidate	Cristina	36:47

<b>No.</b>	<b>Date of the Observation</b>	<b>Fieldwork Activity</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Time</b>
20	October 30, 2017	Interview observation at Spencer Junior	Recruiter: Maribel Candidate: Robert	28:07
21	November 7, 2017	Informal meeting with a recruiter	Paula (Spencer)	N/R
22	November 13, 2017	Interview observation at Spencer Junior	Recruiter: Carla Candidate: Charlotte	44:22
23	November 21, 2017	Interview with a candidate	Ramón	39:36
24	November 22, 2017	Interview with a candidate	Charlotte	16:06
25	January 25, 2018	Phone call interview with HR department of a multinational company	Sofia, Maria (Electric Power)	N/R
26	January 31, 2018	Visit to a public employment office		N/R
27	February 6, 2018	Interview with an Account Manager	Martina (Multilingual Job Platform)	33:25
28	February 26, 2018	Visit to a business fair 4FYN and World Mobile Congress		N/R
29	February 26, 2018	Phone screening at Spencer Junior	Recruiter: Lily	N/R
30	March 12, 2018	Observations at Spencer Junior	Recruiter: Alfredo Recruiter Angela	N/R
31	March 14, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Junior	Recruiter: Carla Candidate: Chloe	N/R
32	March 15, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Junior	Recruiter: Carla	N/R
33	March 15, 2018	Phone screening at Spencer Junior	Recruiter: Alfredo Candidate: Peter	N/R
34	March 16, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Junior	Recruiter: Carla Candidate: Anabel	N/R

<b>No.</b>	<b>Date of the Observation</b>	<b>Fieldwork Activity</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Time</b>
35	March 16, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Junior	Recruiter: Valentina Candidate: Paul	N/R
36	April 10, 2017	Interview observation at Spencer Junior	Recruiter: Valentina Candidate: Isabella	N/R
37	April 13, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Junior	Recruiter: Carla Candidate: Isidora	N/R
38	April 13, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Junior	Recruiter: Mia Candidate: Raul	N/R
39	April 16, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Junior	Recruiter: Carla	N/R
40	April 16, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Junior	Recruiter: Mia Candidate: Ava	N/R
41	April 16, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Junior	Recruiter: Mia Candidate: Celia	N/R
42	April 24, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Junior	Recruiter: Abigail Candidate: Lorenzo	N/R
43	April 24, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Junior	Recruiter: Abigail	N/R
44	May 9, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Junior	Recruiter: Valentina Candidate: Jaime	N/R
45	June 20, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Junior	Recruiter: Valentina Candidate: Madison	N/R
46	June 20, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Junior	Recruiter: Valentina Candidate: Daniel	N/R
47	July 18, 2018	Interview with a candidate	Diego	30:45
48	September 18, 2018	Interview with a recruiter	Alfredo (IT Power)	39:16
49	October 8, 2018	Meeting with Manager	Marc (Spencer Senior)	N/R
50	October 8, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Senior	Recruiter: Sara Candidate: Mark	42:47

<b>No.</b>	<b>Date of the Observation</b>	<b>Fieldwork Activity</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Time</b>
51	October 9, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Senior	Recruiter: Lucia Candidate: Julia	50:12
52	October 9, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Senior	Recruiter: Hugo	38:11
53	October 9, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Elite	Recruiter: Bruno Candidate: Francisco	53:35
54	October 9, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Senior	Recruiter: Alba Candidate: Daniela	58:46
55	October 10, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Senior	Recruiter: Marc Candidate: Manuel	45:09
56	October 10, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Senior	Recruiter: Claudia Candidate: Irene	56:23
57	October 10, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Senior	Recruiter: Marc Candidate: Laura	30:04
58	October 10, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Senior	Recruiter: Camila	32:14
59	October 10, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Senior	Recruiter: Veronica Candidate: Federico	N/R
60	October 11, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Senior	Recruiter: Bianca Candidate: Chiara	45:23
61	October 15, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Senior	Recruiter: Manuel Candidate: Silvestre	27:58
62	October 18, 2018	Interview observation at Spencer Senior	Recruiter: Ferran Candidate: Victor	37:57
63	October 16, 2018	Interview with a recruiter	Ivan (Head of Spencer Elite)	47:13
64	October 16, 2018	Interview with a recruiter	Stella (Spencer Elite)	28:08
65	November 6, 2018	Interview with a recruiter of multinational company	Angel (Tasty Co)	51:12

<b>No.</b>	<b>Date of the Observation</b>	<b>Fieldwork Activity</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Time</b>
66	November 13, 2018	Interview with a candidate	Maria	46:29
67	December 3, 2018	Interview with a candidate	Francisco	37:42
68	Marc 2, 2019	Meetings with IT Acquisition Manager and a recruiter	Edgar (IT Power) Alfredo (IT Power)	N/R
69	March 15, 2019	Meeting with the IT Power Recruitment Team		N/R
70	March 27, 2019	Short audio recorded conversation with a recruiter.	Elena (IT Power)	10:58
71	March 27, 2019	Interview observation at IT Power	Recruiter: Alfredo Candidate: Oscar	34:19
72	March 27, 2019	Phone screening at IT Power	Recruiter: Victoria	08:31
73	March 28, 2019	Interview observation at IT Power	Recruiter: Alfredo Candidate: Julio	42:01
74	April 1, 2019	Interview observation at IT Power	Recruiter: Alfredo Candidate: Noel	41:47
75	April 3, 2019	Interview observation at IT Power	Recruiter: Elena Candidate: Luis	54:58
76	April 4, 2019	Interview observation at IT Power	HR Director: Eva Director of IT Unit: Gerard Candidate: Luis	01:26:43
77	April 8, 2019	Interview observation at IT Power	Recruiter: Alfredo Candidate: Esteban	58:53
78	April 10, 2019	Interview observation at IT Power	Recruiter: Alfredo	56:06
79	April 10, 2019	Interview observation at IT Power	Recruiter: Catalina Recruiter: Albert Candidate: Rafael	18:22

<b>No.</b>	<b>Date of the Observation</b>	<b>Fieldwork Activity</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Time</b>
80	April 10, 2019	Interview observation at IT Power	Recruiter: Catalina Candidate: Rafael	47:25
81	April 10, 2019	Short audio recorded conversation with a recruiter.	Fabien (IT Power)	16:59
82	April 10, 2019	Interview with IT Acquisition Manager	Edgar (IT Power)	40:05
83	April 15, 2019	Short audio recorded conversation with a recruiter.	Fabien (IT Power)	15:36
84	April 15, 2019	Interview observation at IT Power	Recruiter: Juana	25:44
85	April 17, 2019	Interview observation at IT Power	Recruiter: Elena	01:32:03
86	April 17, 2019	Audio-recorded interview	Recruiter: Maribel	35:47
87	April 17, 2019	Short audio recorded conversation with a recruiter.	Victoria (IT Power)	03:24
88	April 24, 2019	Interview with a recruiter	Albert (IT Power)	37:49
89	April 24, 2019	Interview observation at IT Power	Recruiter: Alfredo	42:02
90	April 26, 2019	Interview observation at IT Power	Recruiter: Victoria	04:56+ 38:20
91	May 8, 2019	Interview observation at IT Power	Recruiter: Alfredo	49:09
92	May 15, 2019	Interview observation at IT Power	Recruiter: Catalina	32:15
93	May 15, 2019	Interview observation at IT Power	Recruiter: Fabian	28:56
94	May 14, 2019	Short audio recorded conversation with a recruiter.	Catalina (IT Power)	01:24

<b>No.</b>	<b>Date of the Observation</b>	<b>Fieldwork Activity</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Time</b>
95	May 14, 2019	Phone screening at IT Power	Recruiter: Victoria	32:15
96	May 21, 2019	Interview observation at IT Power	Recruiter: Victoria	36:11
97	May 22, 2019	Observations at IT Power		N/R
98	June 5, 2019	Short audio recorded conversation with a recruiter.	Mateo (IT Power)	12:34
99	June 11, 2019	Interview observation at IT Power	Recruiter: Alfredo	52:35
100	June 11, 2019	Interview observation at IT Power	Recruiter: Alfredo	10:20
101	June 12, 2019	Interview observation at IT Power	Recruiter: Elena	33.34



## Appendix D: Interview Questions

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### Interview Questions

#### General questions

1. What is your job title (role) in this company?
2. Who are your company's clients? Your clients?
3. Are your clients national/international? Do you work on retainer or contingency? Do you have permanent clients?
4. Do you work with Human Resources of multinational companies or with specific departments directly?
5. What is your recruitment agency's specialization? What professional areas do you work with mostly?
6. What type of jobs do you look for? Are they senior-level management jobs or executive jobs?
7. How do you find candidates for your clients?
8. What is the role of networks such as LinkedIn and websites like InfoJobs in your daily practice?
9. What is the current state of the labour market in Catalonia?

#### Selection process

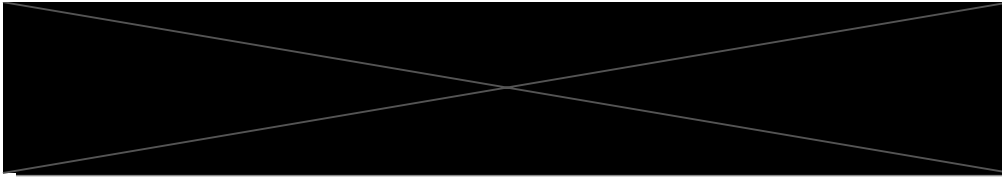
1. What basic criteria are you looking for in a candidate for junior- or senior-level positions? Is it just professional skills or are you also interested in other profile features? What is an ideal candidate profile?
2. How do you do profiling and what kind of databases do you work with? How do you choose an appropriate candidate for an interview? What aspects of CVs do you pay special attention to?
3. What kind of jobs is English required for? What level of English skills are usually found in the job positions that you work with?
4. Are language skills important for getting a job nowadays? Why so? What role do English skills play for a job candidate for junior- or senior-level positions?
5. Can you describe your selection process? How many interviews does it normally consist of? At which point does the candidate know which company he/she is being interviewed for?

6. At which point do you normally ask a candidate about English skills?
7. How are English skills evaluated at your agency?
8. How do you personally evaluate English skills? Do you administer any kind of formal testing?
9. What kind of questions do you usually ask a candidate at a job interview?
10. If a candidate has been successful at all interviews that your recruitment agency carried out but the company did not hire the candidate, what reasons do they usually give you? Do you explain these reasons to candidates (feedback)?

#### **Interview Observation Questions/Information requests**

1. Candidate's CV
2. Job description
3. When was this job posting issued/published? Is this job posting still present on the web-page?
4. Has the client mentioned language (English skills) as a requisite for the job? Specify what the client's language needs are for this post.
5. For how long have you been working on this process?
6. How many candidates have you interviewed so far? Are you planning to interview more candidates? How can you describe this candidate in comparison to the others?
7. Do you like this candidate for the job? Why/Why not?
8. What is your impression of the candidate's language skills? How do his/her skills compare to other candidates?
9. What role are candidate's English skills going to play in this selection process?

## Appendix E: Personality Tests



### Resultado Test de Personalidad

**Candidato:** Hanna Klimava

**Fecha:** 12/06/2019 12:00:20

**A - NECESIDAD DE REALIZAR ( INICIATIVA)**

6.- Es ambicioso, toma la iniciativa; tiene una necesidad intensa de realizar; tiene el deseo de ser el mejor; fija altos padrones de ejecución.

**B - NECESIDAD DE PERTENECER A GRUPOS.**

3.- Persona no influenciada por las actitudes y puntos de vista del grupo. es independiente pudiendo entrar en conflicto con las opiniones del grupo.

**C - TIPO ORGANIZADO**

7/6.- Muy organizado, trata de estar con todo su material siempre en orden.

**D - INTERESADO EN TRABAJAR CON DETALLES**

7/6.- Le agrada realizar trabajos que exijan atención en detalles.

**E - TIPO EMOCIONALMENTE CONTENIDO**

4.- Grado regular de involucramiento emocional con el trabajo, se esfuerza para que sus emociones no interfieran en el trabajo.

**F - NECESIDAD DE OBEDIENCIA A LA AUTORIDAD.**

3.- Auto-confiado y motivado por el trabajo y no por el reconocimiento del jefe. No necesita del incentivo del jefe. Tiende a ser resistente a la autoridad. Se siente libre para expresar sus puntos de vista.

**G - DESEMPEÑO DEL TRABAJO ARDUO Y CONCENTRADO ( RESPONSABILIDAD ).**

6.- Identificación sobre regular con trabajos difíciles.

**I - FACILIDAD EN LA TOMA DE DECISIONES.**

6.- Toma decisiones con facilidad sin, entretanto, apresurarse en dejar de medir las consecuencias de sus decisiones.

**K - NECESIDAD DE SER DEFENSIVAMENTE AGRESIVO**

2.- Está a la defensiva la mayor parte del tiempo, difícilmente se manifiesta abiertamente.

1 / 2



**L - PAPEL DE LIDERAZGO.**

2.- Tiene problemas con liderazgo. Prefiere ser orientado por los otros . No obtiene suficiente recompensa interior en el papel de liderazgo.

**N - NECESIDAD DE COMPLETAR LA TAREA.**

6.- Tiene necesidad de completar sus tareas.

**O - NECESIDAD AFECTIVA.**

4.- Le agrada pertenecer al grupo y participar con otras personas.

**P - NECESIDAD DE CONTROLAR A LOS OTROS ( DOMINANCIA ).**

4.- Agrado de sí mismo y respeta a los otros. Grado regular de preocupación en controlar a los otros.

**R - TIPO TEORICO ( PRACTICA )**

7/6.- Prefiere planificar y formular estrategias 70% del tiempo.

**S - DISPOSICION SOCIAL**

4.- Preocupación regular (50%) con la comunicación social.

**T - TIPO ACTIVO-INQUIETO Y AGIL ( STRESS )**

1.- No le agrada trabajar con presión de plazos, tiende a no dar importancia al tiempo establecido.

**V - TIPO CON VIGOR FISICO.**

5/4.- Grado regular de vigor físico. Tiende a preferir funciones que exijan movimiento limitado.

**W - NECESIDAD DE REGLAMENTO Y SUPERVISION.**

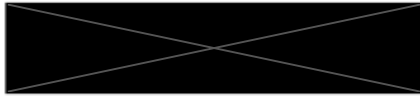
8.- Se preocupa mucho en respetar normas y reglamentos.

**X - NECESIDAD DE SER CONSIDERADO**

5.- Es solícito buscando amistad en el apoyo de los otros.

**Z - NECESIDAD DE CAMBIO. NECESIDAD DE IDENTIFICARSE**

3.- Posee cierta reserva a los cambios. Prefiere trabajos de rutina y repetidos.



## **PAPI-N™ Informe narrativo estándar**

<b>Participante</b>	Hanna Klimava
<b>Fecha de evaluación</b>	lunes, 15 de octubre de 2018

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## Introducción

**Este informe va dirigido a los usuarios autorizados (con licencia) de PAPI. La información que aparece en el informe requiere personal con formación específica para interpretar los resultados. Este informe es confidencial y sólo puede estar disponible para aquellos que hayan completado su formación para el uso de PAPI.**

Los contenidos de este informe sirven de ayuda para los usuarios de PAPI a la hora de interpretar las respuestas individuales que se han dado en el cuestionario. Se pueden utilizar para preparar una entrevista feedback con el participante o para escribir un informe de evaluación.

El informe ofrece una interpretación detallada de las respuestas de Hanna Klimava al cuestionario PAPI-N. Por lo tanto, el informe describe sus preferencias y comportamientos típicos en un entorno laboral.

Recuerde, es importante tener en cuenta que los resultados aquí descritos están basados únicamente en las respuestas que Hanna Klimava dio en el cuestionario. Por lo tanto, las respuestas dadas representan más cómo Hanna Klimava ve su propio comportamiento, en vez de cómo la pueden describir los otros. La exactitud del informe dependerá tanto de la honestidad y sinceridad con la que se realiza el cuestionario, como del grado de conocimiento de sí mismo que uno tiene. Las descripciones de la personalidad aquí expuestas deberían ser tomadas más como hipótesis que como hechos concretos. No obstante, los resultados de este cuestionario proporcionan indicadores útiles de la forma en que Hanna Klimava con toda probabilidad se comportará en el trabajo y en diferentes situaciones.

Sus respuestas al cuestionario PAPI-N en lo tocante a Deseabilidad Social indican que la candidata puede haber respondido de una forma ligeramente más positiva que la realidad. Esto podría deberse a que no desea admitir ningún comportamiento negativo por su parte, o a que intenta ofrecer una imagen positiva de sí misma. Debería tenerse esto en cuenta a la hora de revisar la interpretación que se ofrece en el informe.

Se han interpretado las respuestas de Hanna Klimava al cuestionario, en comparación con el grupo normativo que se indica a continuación:

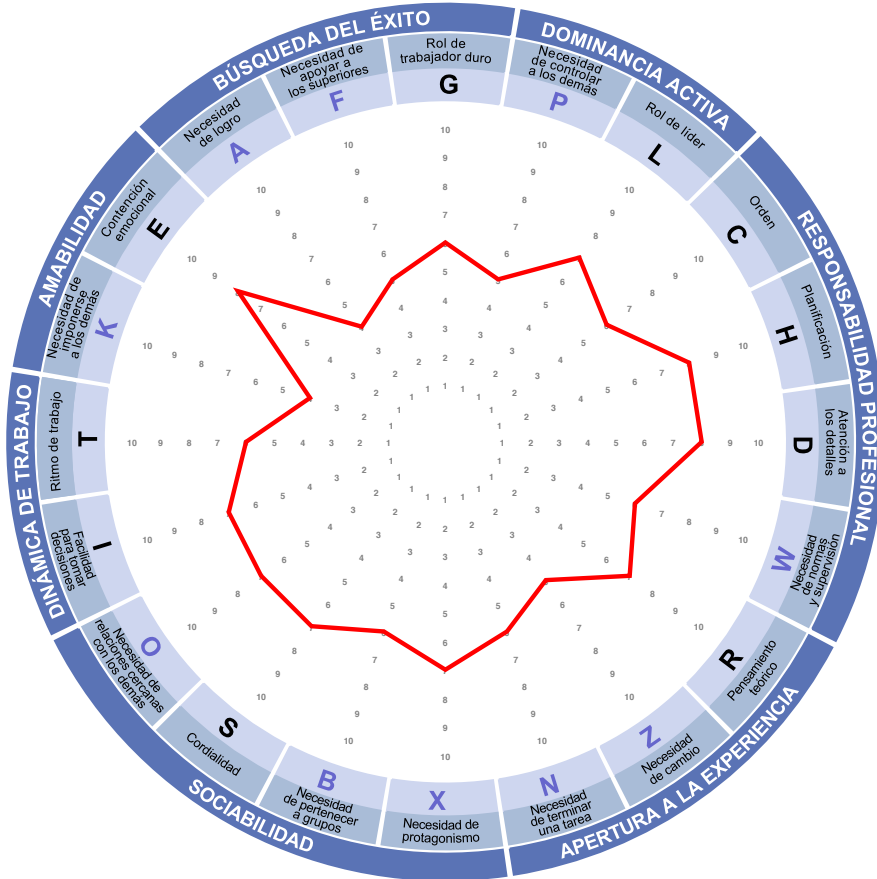
### **España, baremos generales 1.0.**

Este informe tiene una vigencia de 12 meses aproximadamente, dependiendo de las circunstancias laborales de la candidata. Si se sucedieran grandes cambios en su trabajo o en su vida personal después de haber realizado la prueba, debería volver a hacerla.

## Perfil PAPI-N

Tiempo consumido: 15 minutos, 6 segundos

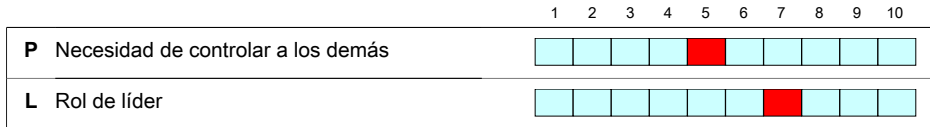
Grupo normativo: España, baremos generales 1.0.



## Interpretación de los resultados

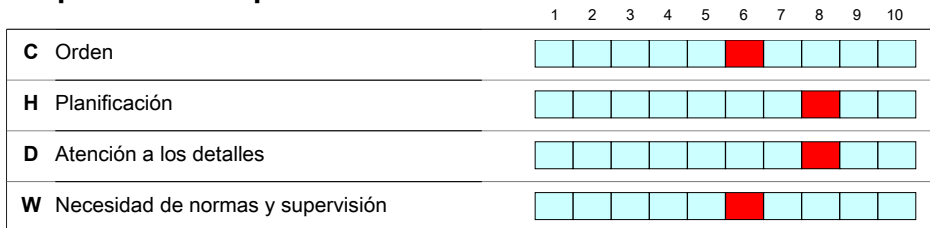
A continuación, se ofrece una interpretación de las respuestas de Hanna Klimava al cuestionario, agrupadas en siete grandes áreas de comportamiento laboral. El informe también contiene una sección adicional con otras interpretaciones que pueden ser de interés.

### Dominancia activa



- Las respuestas dadas por Hanna Klimava indican que, en ocasiones, puede mostrar preferencia por ejercer control e influencia sobre otras personas, dependiendo del contexto y la situación; por ejemplo, cuando ella sabe más sobre una cuestión o tarea que los demás. En otras ocasiones, sin embargo, puede preferir dejar que otros asuman el control.
- Muestra bastante confianza en su capacidad para liderar y dirigir a otras personas. Se ve a sí misma con las cualidades necesarias para dirigir y motivar a un grupo y asegurarse buenos resultados. Probablemente, se encontrará cómoda trabajando en puestos que conlleven responsabilidades directivas.

### Responsabilidad profesional



- Las respuestas dadas por Hanna Klimava sugieren que concede cierta importancia a mantener sus cosas bajo un orden, aunque no lo considera una prioridad. En general, mantendrá su espacio de trabajo y sus documentos (ya sean en papel o electrónicos) lo suficientemente ordenados para encontrar la información que necesite con toda rapidez.
- Se define como una persona con tendencia a reflexionar y planificar con antelación casi siempre. Probablemente, dedica tiempo a evaluar diferentes estrategias y su funcionamiento antes de comenzar proyectos o tareas. A menudo, puede anticipar posibles problemas y cuestiones antes de que lleguen a ocurrir. Es probable que no se encuentre cómoda comenzando tareas a menos que hayan sido planificadas antes, y que le disguste que otros alteren los planes que ya están en funcionamiento.
- Se define como alguien que presta mucha atención a los detalles. Pone mucho énfasis en la revisión para asegurarse de que todo esté correcto. Es muy posible que se enorgullezca de la calidad de su trabajo. A veces, le puede resultar difícil trabajar con fechas de entrega próximas, si esto significa revisar los detalles con rapidez y superficialmente.



- Al emprender nuevos proyectos, prefiere un equilibrio entre seguir unas directrices establecidas y emplear su propia iniciativa. Aunque a veces le gusta contar con un marco de referencia claro, éste no tiene por qué ser necesariamente extenso o detallado.
- Su interés por la planificación junto con su gusto por el detalle indican que, posiblemente, dedicará tiempo y esfuerzo a crear planes detallados contando con la información disponible en el momento. Esto significa que normalmente será capaz de anticiparse a los principales problemas que pudieran surgir y desarrollar planes de contingencia para frenarlos.

### Apertura a la experiencia

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>R</b> Pensamiento teórico										
<b>Z</b> Necesidad de cambio										
<b>N</b> Necesidad de terminar una tarea										

- Hanna Klimava se ve a sí misma trabajando con ideas y generando soluciones creativas. A veces, puede considerar en profundidad cuestiones concretas, y reflexionar sobre las posibilidades y conceptos teóricos.
- En el trabajo le gusta que exista un equilibrio entre cambio y estabilidad. Aunque se adapta a los cambios con rapidez si ve una necesidad clara para ello, también le gusta conservar cierta estabilidad en algunos aspectos de su trabajo.
- Aunque muestra cierto deseo de asegurarse de que se finalizan las tareas y proyectos, no necesita llevar un seguimiento personal del trabajo. Cuando sea apropiado, puede dejar la responsabilidad de finalizar las tareas a otros.

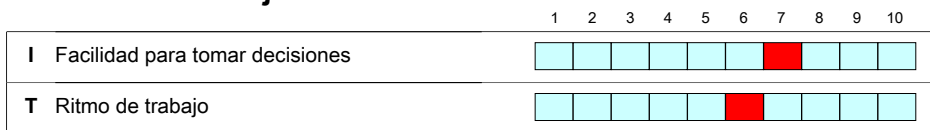
### Sociabilidad

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>X</b> Necesidad de protagonismo										
<b>B</b> Necesidad de pertenecer a grupos										
<b>S</b> Cordialidad										
<b>O</b> Necesidad de relaciones cercanas con los demás										

- Hanna Klimava muestra una clara inclinación por ser el centro de atención. En el trabajo en grupo, normalmente participará en las discusiones de forma activa y animada. Puede haber ocasiones en las que se sienta un poco frustrada si considera que no está recibiendo suficiente atención o reconocimiento.
- Se muestra como alguien que disfruta tanto de la compañía como de la soledad. Probablemente, se sentirá cómoda tanto en el trabajo en grupo como trabajando ella sola; en general le gusta el equilibrio entre ambos.
- En el trabajo, se considera bastante extravertida y sociable. Por regla general, encuentra bastante fácil hacer amistad con los demás.

- Muestra preferencia por establecer relaciones amistosas en el trabajo, y por lo general, mostrará empatía con los problemas de los demás. Es posible que sea una persona en la que se puede confiar, y muy sensible hacia los sentimientos de los demás.
- Socialmente segura de sí misma y agradable, disfrutará conociendo gente y tratando con ellos regularmente. Es probable que dé valor a los contactos sociales y que considere esto como un aspecto importante en la correcta realización de su trabajo, Sin embargo, puede acabar dando prioridad a este aspecto sobre las tareas propiamente dichas.
- Muestra una clara orientación hacia la gente, y es probable que esto le interese más que enfocarse únicamente a desempeñar tareas. Su naturaleza sociable le llevará a establecer fácilmente relaciones estrechas de amistad. Puede tener dificultad a la hora de entrar en conflicto con los demás, y es probable que tome medidas para evitarlo en lo posible.

### Dinámica de trabajo



- Hanna Klimava se considera una persona con capacidad de decidir con bastante rapidez. La mayoría de las veces, se siente bastante cómoda en situaciones en las que tiene que escoger un curso de acción rápidamente.
- Se muestra como una persona que generalmente adopta un equilibrio entre el trabajo rápido y el trabajo más lento y reflexivo.

### Amabilidad



- Hanna Klimava normalmente toma una actitud de no-enfrentamiento con los demás. Aunque en ciertos momentos puede entrar en desacuerdo con los demás y enfrentarse al conflicto, esto sólo ocurrirá cuando un problema le toque muy de cerca.
- En el trabajo, se considera una persona calmada y controlada. Rara vez mostrará a los demás cómo se siente en realidad. Su actitud tranquila puede hacer que los demás no lleguen a conocer sus sentimientos sobre situaciones concretas.

- Se muestra como una persona equilibrada y tranquila en su trato con los demás. Está abierta a las opiniones de otras personas y rara vez llegará a exaltarse, aunque puede mostrar dificultad al enfrentarse a los conflictos.

### Búsqueda del éxito

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>A</b> Necesidad de logro										
<b>F</b> Necesidad de apoyar a los superiores										
<b>G</b> Rol de trabajador duro										

- Aunque muestra cierto deseo de conseguir el éxito en el trabajo que realiza, tiende a conceder más importancia a otros aspectos de su vida fuera del trabajo. Es posible que no sienta necesidad de competir con los demás porque prefiere centrarse en sus propios objetivos.
- Aunque muestra un deseo moderado de cumplir las expectativas de su jefe, en ciertas situaciones cuestionará sus decisiones si no está de acuerdo con ellas.
- Se define como una persona que otorga una importancia moderada al trabajo duro. Aunque le otorga cierto grado de valor, también es consciente de la necesidad de ser eficiente y efectiva.

### Interacción entre escalas

*Esta sección contiene una interpretación adicional basada en los enlaces entre escalas en factores diferentes, que puede proporcionar una percepción más profunda de la personalidad del candidato.*

#### S decatipo 7 y K decatipo 4

- Normalmente, se muestra como una persona agradable y no conflictiva en su trato con otros. Aunque esto le permite trabajar en un ambiente amistoso con los demás, también podría llevarla directamente a evitar las cuestiones que pudieran causar controversia.