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POLICY APPROACHES TO ENGLISH

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Preface

This text was commissioned by the *Language Policy Division* for the Conference on *Languages, diversity, citizenship: policies for plurilingualism in Europe* (13-15 November 2002). In the framework of a general discussion of diversification of language education policies, the need emerged to single out the “question” of the role of English teaching/learning in Europe for separate treatment. This problem has long been recognised as crucial for implementing any kind of diversified language teaching. At the Innsbruck Conference on “*Linguistic diversity for democratic citizenship in Europe*” (10-12 May 1999), the *Language Policy Division* was specifically asked to produce discussion papers on this particular aspect of language policy. This text, together with others in the same series, is a response to this demand from member States.

This debate should also be seen in relation to the “*Guide for the development of language education policies in Europe: from linguistic diversity to plurilingual education*”. This Guide is both a descriptive and forward-looking document aimed at highlighting the complexity of the issues involved in language education, which are often addressed too simplistically. It endeavours to describe the methods and conceptual tools for analysing different language teaching situations and organising language education in accordance with Council of Europe principles. The present document also broaches this major issue, but given its subject-matter, it obviously cannot address it exhaustively.

The aim here is to review the issue of English in relation to plurilingualism, which many Council of Europe Recommendations have pinpointed as a principle and goal of language education policies. It is essential that plurilingualism be valued at the level of the individual and that their responsibility in this matter be assumed by all the education institutions concerned.

Jean-Claude Beacco et Michael Byram

1. The dominance of English in our World

The leading role which English has attained in our world is the result of past historical developments and present political constellations. As a consequence of British colonialism in the past English has been introduced as a national or official language into a number of countries worldwide. The present dominant position of the United States strengthens its position as the language of international affairs (political, economic, scientific, cultural; etc.). Furthermore, the recent development of the mass communication media (satellite TV; internet, etc.) substantially supports the omnipresence of English around the globe.

English has thus adopted the function of *lingua franca* of internationalisation and globalisation and is likely to retain it for the next decades.

As a *lingua franca*

- it is spoken more among non-native speakers than among native speakers or between native and non-native speakers
- it is not directly associated with a country where it is spoken by native speakers, and there is no need, in language teaching, to teach about a country where the language is spoken by native speakers
- norms of correct pronunciation, grammar and the meaning of words vary from one part of the world to another and new varieties of English (new 'Englishes') are appearing, some of which are not comprehensible to speakers of other varieties.

There are above all three aspects which contribute to the attraction of English and the worldwide motivation for learning English:

- its marketplace value: it obviously pays to learn English (for private and professional purposes)
- its simplicity in grammatical structure and the ease with which it can be learnt – at least at the elementary level
- its status: for many people the use of English is often associated with participation in wealth and progress; English is therefore unlike other languages in its status: it is not a 'foreign' or 'second' language in its symbolic function.

There is no doubt, then, that in our world at least a basic command of English is essential for private and professional development, intercomprehension and international participation. In our world the command of 'basic English' has almost attained the status of a cultural technique (like reading and writing). It might therefore appear that it is sufficient to teach English as the only foreign language and to teach it as *lingua franca* detached from a specific sociocultural context.

However, a mere pragmatic argumentation in favour of offering only one foreign language that serves as *lingua franca* overlooks and neglects the fact that

learning foreign languages is more than a purely functional enterprise. Learning a foreign language reaches far beyond memorizing grammar and vocabulary or phrases for everyday communication. Since normally a language is closely connected to a specific cultural context, learning a foreign language for the learner opens the door to 'new worlds' beyond their own socio-culture. Therefore, foreign language learning not only comprises pragmatic-functional aspects (development of skills like listening and speaking, reading and writing) but also pedagogical and intercultural aspects of personality formation:

- it broadens the learner's view and experience of the world outside and opens new perspectives on their own world; it stimulates fantasies of participation in the foreign world
- it contributes to forming attitudes towards other people and their cultural background (of openness, interest and tolerance or of prejudice and aversion).

2. The Position of the Council of Europe

If Europe is to further grow as an economic and political unity and if the citizens of Europe are to develop a sense of belonging together and of European identity the issue of foreign language teaching and learning reaches beyond pragmatic and pedagogical dimensions. It becomes a political issue which calls for the development of an explicit language education policy.

2.1. European language education policy: Maintenance and promotion of diversity

It is a fundamental characteristic of Europe as a whole and most Member States of the Council of Europe individually that they are *multicultural and multilingual*. The situation in Europe is characterized by the *diversity of dozens of languages and cultures* (more than 80 in over 40 countries with very different numbers of native speakers, cultural background, geographic distribution, etc.).

As a consequence, for Europe *linguistic diversity for the plurilingual individual* has been formulated as the overall guideline for a language education policy (cf. the documents of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe [R (98)] and of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe [R (1383) and 1539]).

This means that Europeans should become plurilingual and intercultural citizens, able to interact with other Europeans in all aspects of their lives and therefore, a threefold objective of European foreign language policy is propagated:

2.1.1. A pragmatic objective:

Learning foreign languages serves to facilitate the private and professional mobility of the citizens and the exchange of ideas.

2.1.2. An intercultural objective:

Learning foreign languages should contribute to overcoming prejudices and
Developing mutual interest and tolerance among European citizens

2.1.3. A socio-political objective:

Learning foreign languages serves to protect and support the rich heritage of linguistic and cultural diversity as a source of mutual enrichment

From this we may draw a few conclusions concerning the principles of European foreign language policy:

- If we agree that all languages and cultures in the ‘House of Europe’ (and outside) are equal and that no language or culture must be discriminated against, foreign language teaching must aim at creating interest in the cultures of European neighbours and developing an attitude of openness, of tolerance and respect for otherness and difference. As a consequence, in the European context, foreign language teaching not only aims at developing pragmatic skills, but it also comprises the socio-cultural background which is closely connected with every language.
- In the European context plurilinguality, i.e. learning more than one foreign language, must become more and more a vital and central element of formal education; for the European citizen of the future the development of plurilinguality is a civil right – and civil duty.
- As a consequence, every European should be given the chance to learn more than one foreign language while at school.
- A diversity of languages should be offered; this includes the languages with a comparatively small number of native speakers, the languages of minority groups within a country and especially refers to the languages of the immediate geographic neighbours (most European countries have many more than one neighbour), but it may also refer to non-European languages.
- Learning a foreign language may have different objectives and motivations, it can be done with varying intensity, with a variety of methods and in various contexts (at home or abroad; in the classroom or outside; with the help of textbooks or other media; while at school or after) and it may lead to varying profiles of skills and proficiency in the different languages that are learnt (cf. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*)

2.2. The twofold role of English in the European context

In contrast to all other languages English in the European plays a double role:

2.2.1. On the one hand, there obviously is a basic demand for a language which can be used for everyday exchanges among Europeans.

In the past several attempts have been made to create an artificial language for that purpose – Esperanto was the most prominent example – but they were all unsuccessful. Apparently, it is difficult to motivate people to learn an artificial language that serves only limited functional purposes and refers to no “real” sociocultural context and world.

For reasons mentioned above English is the language that fulfils this lingua franca function.

2.2.2. But a mere lingua-franca approach to the teaching of English in Europe falls short of attaining vital goals of the European language policy described above. There are a number of communities and countries in the 'House of Europe' whose native language is English (e.g. Great Britain). This means that in Europe English is closely related to specific socio-cultural contexts. They must be included when offering English in Europe.

As a consequence, the teaching of English in Europe – at least at the level of compulsory education – should aim at integrating two main perspectives:

- a) Offering “English for all” i.e. developing pragmatic-functional skills in English that are useful for everyday communication, especially at the elementary level. Since “everyday situations”, “speech functions”, “everyday vocabulary and phrases”, etc. cannot be presented except in a realistic socio-cultural setting, there is no reason why English – even if its lingua franca function is emphasised - should not be embedded in everyday situations in English speaking countries and then transferred to ‘neutral’ lingua franca situations of language usage (cf. 2.1.3.).

For this purpose the “communicative approach” to the teaching of English with its emphasis on language usage and the development of skills (listening and speaking, but also reading and writing) appears to be the most feasible didactic concept.

- b) Offering further and direct information about socio-cultural aspects of the English-speaking countries (inside and outside Europe) at a later stage of proficiency in English.

Traditionally, in many European countries the first foreign language - mostly English - occupies a large part of the time available for foreign languages in the school curriculum and it aims at attaining a very high level of pragmatic, linguistic and cultural proficiency (“near-nativeness”).

This approach cannot and should not be maintained for the teaching of “*English for all*”, but it should be limited to those foreign language classes which specialize on English at a higher level of proficiency in the school curriculum.

3. English in the Language Curriculum

As a result of the socio-political changes of the last decades (cf. section 1) the position of English has been strengthened not only worldwide but also in Europe. It holds the first place among foreign languages offered in the curriculum. In almost all Member States of the Council of Europe (outside the English-speaking countries), not only in compulsory education (school level) but also in institutions for adult education and lifelong learning.

This development is irreversible and it presents a certain danger to the concept of European language policy (cf. section 2), since it might lead to a reduction – or even extinction - of linguistic diversity in Europe.

Since English holds this important strategic role in language policy, the question is how to harness the potentials of English for the development of a plurilingual concept

There are two ways of dealing with the problem:

3.1. Organisation of the curriculum :

If it is true that the motivation for learning English is very high among most learners and English is so easy to learn the time allocated to English could be limited in the school curriculum and the rest of the time reserved for language teaching could be used for offering other languages:

3.1.1. Introducing English as a basic skill from the beginning of schooling (or at pre-school level) provided that there is a guarantee that other languages are learnt later.

3.1.2. Offering English at a later stage and for a limited time (as a subsequent foreign language) with the expectation that learners further develop their competence in English either in specialist courses offered in the school curriculum at a later stage or in time outside compulsory education.

3.1.3. Using English as a medium of instruction for teaching other school subjects (the concept of immersion) in countries where English is taught as a first foreign language and after a few years the proficiency in English is high enough. This may refer to subjects like Geography and History, but also to Sciences, provided that teachers of these subjects with an adequate command of English are available.

3.2. Development of didactic concepts of plurilinguality: creating synergies in offering subsequent foreign languages after English

Acquiring additional languages in a didactic concept of plurilinguality is not seen as the development of different languages in 'watertight compartments' the learners' mind, but it is regarded as the further development and enrichment of acquired linguistic competence and extension of the individual's existing repertoire.

English as the first foreign language English can be used as a basis for further language learning in many ways.

Two aspects for foreign language learning are essential for the further development of synergies in such a didactic concept:

3.2.1. The use and extension of declarative linguistic knowledge

Many of the European languages are closely related to each other, i.e. they either belong to the same 'family of languages' (like the Germanic languages or the Romance languages) or in the development of history have established close ties and have influenced one another (cf. the influence of Latin on all aspects of formal education and learning or religion throughout the Middle Ages; the substantial influence of French on English after the Norman conquest of England in the 11th century) Therefore most European languages have many

linguistic elements in common (e.g. vocabulary and grammatical structures) which can be activated and extended.

Since English as a Germanic language has integrated many elements of the Romance languages (via Latin and French) it is the ideal 'basic language' for such a didactic concept, if it is offered as the first foreign language (cf. section 4)

3.2.2. The activation of procedural knowledge

When students learn a foreign language they not only take in new linguistic elements (vocabulary, grammatical structures, pronunciation and orthography of the new language), but they also gather experience how to learn a foreign language. When they learn a second and third foreign language this experience of 'learning to learn a foreign language' can be discussed with the students and expanded for more efficient learning (use of efficient techniques and strategies of foreign language learning).

It is obvious that learning foreign languages especially in the European context reaches far beyond compulsory education. Since the active use of procedural knowledge is the basis for efficient and autonomous life-long learning of languages after school, the development of procedural knowledge ('learning to learn') is an essential objective in a plurilingual didactic approach.

4. Creating synergies in the plurilingual concept: examples of didactic scenarios for English

4.1. Example 1: English as the first foreign language and German as a subsequent (tertiary) language

The following didactic concept was developed in the framework of the medium-term programme of activities 2000 – 2003 of the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML)/ Graz (project 1.1.2.: "Learning more than language efficiently in Europe: German as a subsequent language after English", coordinated by Bitta Hufeisen and Gerhard Neuner).

4.1.1. Developing the curricular framework of tertiary language learning

When developing the foundations of a didactic concept of tertiary language teaching the first steps to be undertaken are

- a) the comparison of the linguistic systems of mother tongue (L1), first foreign language (L2) and subsequent languages (L3...) which brings to light the closeness or difference of the languages involved. It gives us hints where transfer can be activated (equal or similar elements) or interference may occur and must be discussed.

A scenario:

If English is the first foreign language and German the second language offered we may find various degrees of closeness/difference between L1, L2 and L3:

A few examples from the European context:

- L1 Hungarian – L2 English – L3 German:

substantial differences between L1 and L2/L3, closeness of L2 and L3; learners of L3 will probably refer more to L2 than to L1 when learning L3

- L1 French – L2 English – L3 German:

learners of L3 will refer to L2 when learning L3, but there are also many points of reference between L3 and L1

- L1 Norwegian – L2 English – L3 German:

L1 closer to L3 than to L2; learners of L3 will probably refer more to L1 than to L2 when learning L3.

As a consequence, learners of German as a tertiary language (L3) will find various degrees of reference to the languages already stored in their minds (L2/L3) and for that reason the function of English (L2) as a mediator of tertiary languages (L3) will vary.

Therefore, the specific constellation of L1, L2 and L3 must be taken into account when developing a didactic concept of tertiary language learning on the basis of English as L2.

b) the comparison of the methods of teaching and learning the mother tongue and the first foreign language.

The development of a didactic concept of tertiary language learning must take into account previous methods of language teaching and ways of language learning. Students who learn tertiary languages will refer to their previous experiences in language learning. They can be activated and expanded.

4.1.1.1. Areas of linguistic transfer between English and German

English and German are closely related languages:

a) in the field of grammatical structures especially at elementary level there are many similarities

e.g. English: “My father is fifty years old.” “What is that?” etc.
German: „Mein Vater ist fünfzig Jahre alt.“ „Was ist das?“ etc

b) in everyday vocabulary there are more than a thousand words with identical or similar meaning (words with the same origin, loan words, internationalisms), which offer a quick access to the comprehension of texts in German.

Examples:

- Similarities in word field “parts of the body”:

English: nose, hair, ear, chin, shoulder, elbow, hand, finger, etc.

German: Nase, Haar, Ohr, Kinn, Schulter, Ellbogen, Hand, Finger, etc.

- Internationalisms:

taxi/Taxi; police/Polizei; meter/Meter; computer/Computer; etc.

In addition, present day German is loaded with hundreds of anglicisms.(in areas such as the youth and pop scene; technology; sports; dress; food and drink; etc.)

Examples:

- Anglicisms:

pop group; jeans; t-shirt; basket ball; top spin; e-mail; hamburger; etc.

4.2. Didactic principles of tertiary language teaching/learning

4.1.2.1. Cognitive teaching and learning

Cognitive teaching and learning comprises three dimensions:

- a) Developing language awareness

This pertains to all aspects of language, e.g. comparing and discussing the linguistic elements of L1, L2 and L3, activating transferring those similar elements from L1 and L2 which are useful for the learning of L3; discussing those elements which are different in L1 and L2.

- b) Developing intercultural awareness

Comparing and discussing sociocultural similarities and differences of L1, L2 and L3 (intercultural learning).

- c) Developing awareness of language learning

Discussing aspects of teaching and learning especially of L2 and further developing efficient techniques and strategies for the learning of L3.

4.1.2.2. Emphasis on comprehension

Foreign language learning – like any other process of learning – starts with comprehension (perception, interpretation and integration of new elements). The process of comprehension is neither ‘passive’ nor only ‘receptive’, but it is a most lively, although mute, mental activity which refers to all aspects of language (e.g. form, function, content; etc.).

Since there is a wide range of common and comprehensible vocabulary and grammatical structure between English and German, at the elementary level texts can be selected or devised that provide an easy access to comprehension and may serve as a basis for developing utterance (speaking and writing).

4.1.2.3. Emphasis on sociocultural content

While learning English as the first foreign language comprises aspects of lingua franca (cf. section 2), the teaching of tertiary languages is firmly founded in dealing with the new language in its sociocultural context.

When L3 is offered in the school curriculum learners have reached the stage of young people with a broadened interest in the world outside their own socioculture. Therefore, tertiary language learning not only aims at developing pragmatic-functional perspectives but also perspectives of intercultural learning.

In the case of German as L3 the broad basis of the ‘common English-German vocabulary’ which comprises many areas and aspects of everyday life opens up opportunities of offering topics in L3 teaching which refer to the actual situation and interests of young adults.

4.1.2.4. Emphasis on dealing with texts

In the foreign language classroom the foreign language and socioculture is never represented directly but inevitably through all kinds of texts (written and oral texts; pictures; videos; etc.) with different didactic functions and qualities (authentic and synthetic texts ; etc.).

For that reason, strategies of text comprehension (global; selective; detailed comprehension) must be developed from the beginning of instruction.

4.1.2.5. Emphasis on methods of teaching and learning that activate the learners and help to save time

In most cases in the school curriculum less time is allocated to L3 than to L2, but similar results are expected. Traditionally, this leads to a concentration on grammar in L3 instruction and a reduction of the time dedicated to exercises – with dubious results.

A concept of tertiary language teaching and learning based on plurilingual foundations, i.e. on activating transfer, stimulating language awareness and awareness of language learning as described above (sections 3 and 4) may lead to more motivating activities in the classroom and stimulate learner autonomy. Such a didactic approach needs to be developed.

4.3. Example 2: English as the tertiary language (L3) and German as the first foreign language (L2)

There may be circumstances where it might be feasible to offer English as a tertiary language (L3) and other languages as the first foreign language (L2):

- a) in situations where there is a close contact to an area with another language (neighbourhood situation)
- b) in situations where traditionally another language holds the first place in certain types of schools in the school system of a country

For German, for example, there are a number of countries where it is the language of immediate geographic neighbouring countries (the German-speaking countries altogether have 14 neighbouring countries and languages) or where in the tradition of institutes of higher education it holds the first place among foreign languages offered (e.g. in a number of countries in Central and Eastern Europe like Bulgaria and Russia, and Turkey).

In such a constellation – when the first foreign language taught is closely related linguistically to English (like German) – provided that the same procedures for the plurilingual planning of the curriculum and development of a didactic concept are applied, it may be expected that in the final analysis the results for English as a tertiary language will be as good as in the constellation where English is offered as the first foreign language.

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