

Competency-based Language Teaching in Higher Education

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Competency-based Language Teaching in Higher Education

 Springer

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Preface

Languages in the European Higher Education Area

Introduction

More than ERASMUS grants, transferable ECTS credits or Bologna-compatible qualifications frameworks, languages are the principle key to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Linguistic diversity is a major feature of Europe – even though most Europeans perceive but a small part of its rich and complex reality – and this raises major issues about the learning and use of languages in higher education in Europe, both in curricula and for the purpose of mobility. While the “old” ideal of full integration of mobile students into the host university’s normal curriculum is still highly valued by many educators, and remains an actual option for some students in some countries/languages, the linguistic reality of Europe is relegating this ideal to merely one option among many, in particular in view of the growing acknowledgement of the role of “global English” as a means of communication not delimited by national context or mobility itinerary.

Multilingualism in Europe

Most of the 500 million citizens of the European Union’s 27 Member States are not aware that their language is but one of 23 official languages using three different alphabets (Roman, Cyrillic and Greek) and belonging to three different families (in addition to Indo-European languages such as the Roman, Slavic, Greek and Germanic languages, the EU counts three Finno-Ugrian official languages – Hungarian, Finnish and Estonian – and one Semitic language – Maltese). In addition, there are some 60 regional and minority languages, not to mention a variety of immigrant languages, some of which – Arabic and Turkish, for example – count a large number of native speakers throughout the Union. Several European languages have come to be widely spoken as native languages outside Europe – English of course, but also Spanish, Portuguese and French – and widely learnt as foreign languages in other countries.

In the 47 nations that constitute the European Higher Education Area, the number and diversity of languages is correspondingly greater than in the EU: It suffices to refer to the Russian, Serbian, Albanian, Turkish, Kazakh, Azeri, Georgian or Armenian languages. How many Europeans are aware that in the EHEA the language that counts the highest number of native speakers is Russian, followed – at a distance – by German and Turkish, both of which are well ahead of English or French?

Moreover, Europe is multilingual not only in the sense that Europeans speak so many different mother tongues. It is also multilingual in the sense that a substantial – and rising – proportion of Europeans are able to speak one or more languages in addition to their own. According to a Eurobarometer survey carried out in 2006,¹ 56% of EU citizens declare that they are able to hold a conversation in at least one language other than their mother tongue; 28% can do this in two foreign languages and 11% in three.

These figures, however, mask the fact that multilingualism is very unevenly distributed across Europe: while 44% of Europeans attest to not knowing any other language than their mother tongue, they form a majority in 6 of the 27 member states: more than 60% in Ireland and the UK, and more than 55% in Italy, Hungary, Spain and Portugal.

Some 83% of Europeans find that knowing another language is “useful” or “very useful” (a ten percentage point increase over the previous Eurobarometer survey in 2001). One in every five Europeans is an active language learner, even though many others acknowledge that they lack the time, motivation or money to learn languages. The perceived benefits of knowing another language range from humanist values (dialogue and communication, understanding other people and cultures, promoting peace and citizenship) to practical (possibilities to travel, study and work abroad) and increasingly to professional notions of “employability”. Indeed, the effort involved in learning a foreign language seems, increasingly, to be justified by the practical benefits expected from the exercise, mainly in the professional sphere as an enhancement of employability (for nearly 60% of language learners). A survey of European graduates from several countries shows that – except in English-speaking countries – a large proportion of Europeans (41%) see their (insufficient) fluency in a foreign language (usually English) as an educative handicap in their professional development, and this proportion rises to 62% among Spanish graduates.² This trend towards practicality becomes even more remarkable when placed alongside another major linguistic phenomenon of contemporary Europe, i.e. the rather narrow concentration of language learners on a small number of foreign languages: 38% of all EU Europeans speak English as a foreign language, followed by French and German (14% each), Spanish (6%), Russian and Italian (3% each). Only 5% of language learning in Europe relates to a language other than one of these six. The era when the most important language to learn was that of one’s neighbouring nation is over.

¹Eurobarometer, *Europeans and their languages*, 2006.

²REFLEX, <http://www.aneca.es/informesyestudios/observatorio.aspx#1797>.

The importance of multilingualism as a challenge and an opportunity for Europe has been the subject of many studies and much research by the European Commission, both before and after the recent jump from 15 to 27 Member countries. The most recent Communication of the European Commission on this subject³ stresses the increased challenges and opportunities attending multilingualism for the enlarged EU in the world context. The Commission wants to promote the learning of all languages, not just the major ones, and emphasises the role of multilingualism in enhancing employability in Europe and the competitiveness of the EU in the world, exploring in particular the ‘external dimensions’ of multilingualism in Europe and ways of increasing the effectiveness of language learning by Europeans. Yet, the Communication does not address specifically the main and most controversial issue, i.e. the role of learning and speaking *English* as a crucial dimension of the debate about the role of learning and speaking languages in Europe.

The Issue About “Global English”

Is the expansion of English into a ‘predator’ language that sooner or later kills all other languages (and the cultures to which they belong) an irresistible process, as it gains learners and speakers across Europe and the world? To what extent does it, unconsciously, inculcate in millions of non-native learners of English the values and ideology of the USA and UK? What does this mean in the world of international education, and more specifically in the European Higher Education Area? Is being or becoming fluent in English indeed an unwarranted advantage or privilege in studying and working in Europe? All these questions tend to be assessed from a mainly idealistic, nationalistic or ideological viewpoint rather than through neutral, pragmatic and dispassionate eyes. English is indeed the native language of Europeans living in the UK, Ireland and Malta, and in this context it is connected, like any other language, to the literature, culture, history and role of those people and countries in today’s world. It could be argued that using ‘their’ language inevitably involves using their (national, or maybe nationalistic) way of naming and interpreting places, events and people. Yet is it not also arguable that the English language has acquired a distinctive role in the world, one much more distanced from its roots, which is less nationalistically, ideologically or culturally loaded and thus more neutral. This role is functional – a means of communication between persons from different, non-English speaking countries who happen to have English as their only language in common. This kind of “international” or “global” English is the language used by a Chinese pilot talking to air traffic control in Dubai, or, most likely, by a French engineer talking technology with a Polish client. Michael Woolf (a Briton himself) provocatively asserts that British English, and even American English, have become

³ Communication of the European Commission to the European Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions, COM(2008)566 of 18 September 2008.

no more than regional dialects of “international” English.⁴ International English is a language that is spoken more widely – and with many regional variations – as a foreign language than English as a mother tongue in today’s world. Even though these “international” or “global” versions of the English language are not disconnected from their common origin, they are quite distanced from the cultural background of the language’s origins and come with a huge variety in vocabulary, syntax, pronunciation and even grammar.

English as a Key to Progress in the European Higher Education Area

A traditional standard of quality in international education is the integration of the mobile student in the normal courses and student group of the host university, in the language of the host country. This has been the ideal of the ERASMUS programme and many other overseas study schemes for decades, and it is clear that this kind of international experience comes with a deep immersion in the host language and culture and associated benefits in terms of intercultural competencies.

Hence, from these viewpoints, this model guarantees a high level of “quality”. But it would be wrong to establish it as the only qualitative standard in international education. This ideal model can function properly in only a limited number of situations, characterised by students who already have an excellent command of the language of the host country on commencing their studies abroad. This may be a realistic expectation in some cases, e.g. for future language teachers or other foreign language majors, for students of linguistically homogeneous “area studies” such as French Studies or German Studies (as opposed to Asian or Mediterranean Studies covering regions with a variety of languages) and for those studying abroad in their own or a related language (e.g. Danish students in Sweden). In most cases, however, requiring that incoming students have a sufficient command of the language of the host university would be completely unrealistic and would stem the flow of international students to that university and that country. This is the case with the vast majority of students studying disciplines other than languages and area studies and is also the case with the majority of countries and languages in Europe: even universities located in countries using one of the most-learned languages of the world cannot expect students in all disciplines to arrive fluent in their language, if they want to internationalise their campus. Universities located in other countries may only attract a very small number of foreign students who, for whatever personal reason, are interested in studying their language, but need to turn to an “international” language (nearly always English) if they want to fully participate in international education exchanges and take advantage of the EHEA. Accepting only

⁴ EAIE Occasional Paper 17, 2005: *I Gotta Use Words When I Talk to You*, ed. Michael Woolf (Chap. 5, *English Language and International Education: Beyond Stagnation*, pp. 45–51).

students who are fluent in the local language would drastically reduce the number of foreign students who get a chance to study in that country, and would impoverish all the stakeholders in international education schemes, whether incoming students, host university, host community, or local students. The only broadly applicable and functional solution is to use English as an international medium of communication. Experience shows that even groups conversing in, say, German, feel compelled to resort to English as soon as a non-German speaker joins the conversation. There is growing acknowledgement in the higher education community that admitting foreign students into courses delivered in English has the advantage of exposing them nonetheless to the national language and way of life, and that most will acquire a basic knowledge of the host language, allowing them to function in that environment. Indeed, some may, as a result, benefit from learning of a language and country that would otherwise have been denied them. Integrating local students who have sufficient command of the English language offers the added advantage of providing an opportunity of interaction and avoiding the possible ghettoization resulting from on-campus courses or “islands” for foreigners only.

Whether they like it or not, the majority of universities in the majority of countries in the EHEA are faced with this reality. Some may choose to protect the would-be purity of international relations in their own language only, at the risk of cutting themselves and their students off from mainstream internationalisation. The majority will have to find accommodations using the English language as the only multilateral means of communication for students in all disciplines from all countries, including foreign students as well as their own. The more universities accept this reality and develop courses in English for native and incoming students, the sooner the EHEA will become a tangible reality, allowing students to choose from its diversity of courses and institutions – even though they have to use English as a means of communication.

Conclusion

I trust the present book will contribute to consolidating the linguistic foundations of the European Higher Education Area. In tune with what most students (and their families and employers) expect from “European” curricula and mobility, it looks into competency-based language teaching/learning – in English for all students, in other languages for some. I trust also that the book will increase readers’ appetite for internationalisation and provide them with a broad but realistic view of the linguistic options open to students. This is enough merit and I wish to congratulate the authors for their work and their contributions to a functioning, user-friendly European Higher Education Area.

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