

**In press, *Encyclopedia of Language and Education* (ed. Nancy Hornberger),  
volume 1: *Language policy and Political Issues in Education* (ed. Stephen May), Springer**

## **LANGUAGE POLICY AND EDUCATION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION**

Robert Phillipson

Language policy is acquiring increasing importance in an age of intensive political and cultural change in Europe. Among the key educational language policy issues in contemporary Europe are ensuring the continued vitality of national languages, rights for minority languages, diversification in foreign language learning, and the formation of a European Higher Education Area (the Bologna process). English, due to its role in globalisation and European integration processes, impacts on each of these four issues in each European state. The role of the European Union (EU) is a second cross-cutting factor, because of its declared commitment to maintaining linguistic diversity and to promoting multilingualism in education. On the other hand it is arguable that the dominance of English in many forms of international activity, the erosion of national borders by changes in communication technology, and the hierarchy of languages that exists *de facto* in EU institutions and EU-funded activities (such as student mobility) may be serving to strengthen English at the expense of other languages.

### **Early developments**

The EU began life as an economic community in 1958 with six member states, Belgium, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, Luxemburg, and the Netherlands. Small enlargements occurred over the following four decades, bringing the total in the mid-1990s to 15 member states. 11 languages had equal rights as the official and working languages of EU institutions. A major enlargement in 2004 brought in 10 additional states (post-communist eastern European states, Cyprus and Malta). 9 languages were added to the world's largest translation and interpretation services. The EU is an immensely complex business: interpretation is provided for an average of 50 meetings each working day, and over 70% of national legislation entails enacting measures that have already been agreed on at the supranational level. European integration significantly affects economic, political, social and cultural life. Whether the present EU is a United States of Europe in the making is unclear. The rejection of the draft EU Constitution in 2005 confirmed the gap between citizens with a strong national identity and the European project of political leaders and a remote unaccountable bureaucracy. The EU has been decisively influenced by a trans-Atlantic corporate neoliberal agenda (Monbiot, 2000), which the constitution would have consolidated. It also covered 'fundamental rights' as a potential counter-balance to the workings of the market, but the provisions on cultural and linguistic rights are weak.

'Europe' is a fuzzy concept. Depending on context, Europe may be a toponym (territory, geography), an econonym (a common market with a common currency, one that some member states have not yet adhered to), a politonym (an amalgam of independent states in a complex new unit with some traits of a federation), or an ethnonym (cultures with shared cultural traits that stress a common Christian past, which some see as excluding Islamic Turkey as a member). Linguistically, Europe is diverse: many languages in the Romance and Germanic families of language derive from Indo-European sources, others are Finno-Ugric, Basque is neither, and

many languages currently in use in Europe, often in substantial numbers, are of more recent diverse immigrant or refugee origins.

Europe is emphatically not synonymous with the EU, though this distinction is frequently blurred. The Council of Europe has twice as many member states as the EU, among them Norway, Russia, Switzerland, and Turkey, which are not members of the EU. It has played a key role in promoting human rights, and political and cultural collaboration. It has also coordinated a significant number of measures to strengthen foreign language learning, including notably the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Trim, 2002; Council of Europe, 2001). It is taking on a more proactive role in language policy formation ([www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int)).

Many European languages have been consolidated as a dominant state language over the past two centuries. Domestic functions have been carried out in the key 'national' language, Danish, Estonian, French, Greek, etc. Promotion of a single national language occurred both in states with an ideology of ethnolinguistically uniform origins (with Germany as the archetype) and those with a republican statist model (typically France). Local minority languages were suppressed, but have gained increasing support in recent decades in several countries (Catalan, Welsh, Saami etc). Foreign languages were learned for external communication purposes and familiarity with the cultural heritage associated with 'great' powers. Since 1945, and more intensively in recent years, there has been a gradual shift towards English becoming by far the most widely learned foreign language on the continent of Europe, taking over space, both in western and eastern Europe, occupied earlier by other foreign languages, French, German and Russian in particular.

While it used to be primarily elites and those professionally concerned with trade or travel who learned foreign languages, these are now part of the curriculum for all. The advance of English in a range of key societal domains, commerce, finance, research and higher education, the media, and popular culture means that English in the modern world no longer fits into the traditional mould of a foreign language (which are referred to as 'modern' or 'living' languages in some countries). There are obvious instrumental reasons for learning the language. European citizens are massively exposed to Hollywood products (whereas in the USA the market share of films of foreign origin is 1%). '70-80% of all TV fiction shown on European TV is American... American movies, American TV and the American lifestyle for the populations of the world and Europe at large have become the lingua franca of globalization, the closest we get to a visual world culture' (Bondebjerg, 2003, 79, 81). These US products are transmitted with the original soundtrack in the Nordic countries and the Netherlands, which strengthens the learning of English, and are generally dubbed elsewhere.

## **Major Contributions**

Foreign language education is embedded in national education systems and their distinct traditions (making generalisation perilous). There has been a progressive shift to more communicatively oriented foreign language learning, and starting ever younger, though the traditional focus on literature often remains at the upper secondary and university levels. Many European university language departments are less concerned with teacher education than with general academic development, literature being supplemented by an increasing focus on the cultures of English-speaking countries, particularly the USA and UK. The diversity of approaches to foreign language teacher training is captured and summarised in a survey commissioned by the EU (Grenfell, Kelly and Jones, 2003). It sums up relevant theory and key variables, and highlights foreign language teacher competences and the reflective practitioner, bringing in examples from different countries ad hoc. It also presents 15 case studies that demonstrate innovative good practice, exemplified by various types of bilingual education, including the limited type, Content and Language Integrated

Learning (see [www.euroclit.net](http://www.euroclit.net)), which is currently regarded as more likely to achieve success than traditional methods. This study of language teacher training is not an isolated project, but rather a symptom of the way the EU is coordinating interaction between representatives of member states with an agenda of reform. Thus the 'Education and training 2010' programme (<http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/2010>) is elaborating 'Common European principles for teacher competences and qualifications', with language learning as one of twelve 'key objectives and areas of cooperation'.

Even in this professional field, where the goal is multilingual competence, English is much the most widely used language at European conferences and publications from them, although English and French are the working languages of the Council of Europe. In some regional European fora, multilingual competence is assumed (e.g. Danish, Norwegian and Swedish, with or without English), in others, receptive competence in a second language, such as German. German is the EU language with by far the largest number of native speakers, and has functioned as a lingua franca in many central and eastern European countries, a role which English is progressively taking over. The French government invests heavily in the promotion of French throughout Europe, and has been instrumental in persuading its EU partners to articulate discourses and policies that proclaim the value of linguistic diversity and language learning. However its efforts tend to be more aimed at preventing further erosion of the status of French as an international language than at ensuring linguistic human rights and equality for speakers of all languages (Phillipson 2003, 45-46 and 133-134).

Teacher qualifications are of decisive importance, and there is evidence from most parts of Europe that many teachers of foreign languages are under-qualified. This in part explains differing degrees of success in foreign language learning, and why figures on the number of learners (data are collected by the EU educational information service [www.eurydice.org](http://www.eurydice.org)) are not revealing on outcomes. Even if most European schoolchildren are now exposed to English in school, most of their elders have not been (for analysis of EU Eurobarometer self-report data on capacity to communicate in a foreign language, see Phillipson, 2003, 8-9). It is therefore wishful thinking to suggest that English is a universal lingua franca in continental Europe.

### **Work in progress**

Schoolchildren in the demographically small European countries have often been taught two foreign languages in school. This policy has been recommended since the 1980s by the Council of Europe, and became EU policy in the 1990s. One factor influencing this policy has been the fear that English represents a threat to the languages and cultures of EU member states, hence the goal of learners developing competence and familiarity with two foreign languages and their cultures. The EU Commission document *Promoting language learning and linguistic diversity: An Action Plan 2004-2006*, of July 2003 is designed to curb an excessive focus on English in continental education systems and the wider society. It states (pp. 4 and 8): 'learning one lingua franca alone is not enough... English alone is not enough... In non-anglophone countries recent trends to provide teaching in English may have unforeseen consequences on the vitality of the national language.' The policy statement advocates life-long foreign language learning, including two foreign languages in the primary school. It strives to bring language policy higher up on national agendas, and to raise awareness of linguistic diversity. It endorses the notion of an inclusive 'language-friendly environment', and states that this openness should include minority languages, those of both local regions and recent immigrants.

These laudable goals are a far cry from the reality, but representatives of member states are requested to attend meetings in Brussels and to describe implementation of the Action

Plan and obstacles to it. Such activity is reported on the EU website (<<http://europa.eu.int/comm/education>>), invariably in English, less often in French, and virtually never in any of the other 18 EU official languages. Two major proposals by the Commission in 2005, a New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism, and a ‘common European language indicator’, i.e. Europe-wide language testing, are aimed at inducing member states to adjust their language policies along the lines of the Action Plan. The policy statements, and comparable ones from the Council of Europe, may or may not influence national policy formation, but the very existence of international pressure of this kind can serve to force states to address language policy issues that they would prefer to ignore.

Both the EU and the Council of Europe are involved in policies to accord rights to regional minority languages (Council of Europe, 2004). Minority language policies differ widely in each EU member state, and are well documented (Williams 2005). There are three EU-funded centres with a specialist role: [Mercator Media](#) at the University of Wales Aberystwyth (UK) researches the media, defined broadly to include the press, book-publishing, archives and libraries as well as broadcast media and the new media; [Mercator Legislation](#) at the CIEMEN foundation, Barcelona (Spain) is concerned with language legislation and language in public administration, while [Mercator Education](#) at the Fryske Akademy, Ljouwert (Netherlands) studies education at all levels.

One pressure that cannot be ignored is the expanding role of English in higher education, especially in northern Europe (Ammon, 2001; Phillipson, 2002, 2006; Wilkinson 2004; Wilson, 2002). This is one dimension of the ‘Bologna process’, the formation of a European Higher Education Area, which has been under way since 1999, and to which the governments of 45 European states are committed. There are bi-annual meetings, at which national and university policies are coordinated. The EU has largely set the agenda for the Bologna process, which entails implementing a uniform undergraduate and graduate degree structure, internal and external quality control, student exchanges, double degrees, joint study programmes, etc. While the initial Bologna text stressed university autonomy, and respect for the languages and cultures of Europe, the most recent policy statement, from Bergen in 2005 ([www.bologna-bergen2005.no](http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no)), appears to conflate internationalisation and ‘English-medium higher education’, and does not refer to multilingualism or language policy.

It is no surprise that the only countries which are ‘observers’ in the Bologna process, and take part in the conferences, are the USA and Australia, since higher education for them is big business. According to a British Council study in 2004, the UK economy benefits by £11 billion p.a. directly, and a further £12 billion indirectly, from ‘international’ education. The British goal is 8 per cent annual growth across the sector, and to double the present number of 35,000 research graduates contributing to the UK’s knowledge economy by 2020 ([www.britishcouncil.org/mediacentre/apr04/vision\\_2020\\_press\\_notice.doc](http://www.britishcouncil.org/mediacentre/apr04/vision_2020_press_notice.doc)). In addition, over 500,000 attend language learning courses each year. A primary goal of the Bologna process is to make higher education in Europe as attractive to students worldwide as in the USA and Commonwealth countries. There is thus a commercial rationale behind English-medium higher education, as well as cultural and political dimensions. (Related but rather different issues are whether the expansion of the intake of foreign students, mostly from Asia, and primarily China, in ‘English-speaking’ countries has created institutional dependence on them for financial reasons, and whether the testing and teaching of such students has been appropriate.)

The quality of education is a key parameter if, say, Finnish or German institutions teach through the medium of English in order to attract foreign students. Research in Norway indicates that the reading skills in English of Norwegians entering higher education, when measured by the British-Australian IELTS tests, are not adequate for academic course books in English

(Hellekjaer, 2004). The picture is probably similar in the other Nordic countries, where virtually all higher education degrees require reading proficiency in English. The Norwegian government is acting to strengthen both English teaching and the learning of a second foreign language through a comprehensive Strategy Plan for 2005-2009.

A related issue is whether continental European academics are qualified to teach as well through the medium of English as through the mother tongue. A few definitely are, but the trend since the early 1990s to expect many academics to do so, without professional support, has not been studied. Academics and researchers in virtually all fields are also expected to publish in English, either exclusively or as well as in the local language, depending on disciplinary pressures and the discourse communities that scholars contribute to. University administrators in the Scandinavian countries are being encouraged to address the language policy implications of English being used more, and to formulate explicit policies for multilingual universities. The Swedish and Danish governments have set a target of 'parallel competence' in English and Swedish/Danish. Finland has invested considerable resources in research and higher education, and seems to have established an impressive infrastructure for strengthening multilingualism, see, for instance, the language policy of the University of Jyväskylä ([www.jyu.fi/strategia/JU\\_language\\_policy.pdf](http://www.jyu.fi/strategia/JU_language_policy.pdf)). This document is in English. It stresses the need for all educators to be aware of their responsibilities for the way language is used, the duty of a Finnish university to strengthen Finnish, as well as English and other languages. Mention is also made of Swedish, the mother tongue of 5.8% of the population, a language that most higher education subjects can be studied in at other Finnish universities. The University of Jyväskylä also offers a five-year teacher training MA through the medium of Finnish Sign language. Doctoral theses are written in a variety of languages (for figures for the country as a whole, see the article on Finland in Ammon, 2001).

In southern and eastern Europe, English is much less firmly entrenched. In some countries the decision was made to teach a foreign language, mostly English, in the primary school, but with inadequate attention to teacher qualifications. In France, the Ministry of Education has implemented measures to ensure the learning of two foreign languages, and to monitor a diversification of the languages learned, so as to promote plurilingualism (a term the Council of Europe uses for personal competence in more than language, by comparison with societal multilingualism). There is also lively public debate about whether there is an excessive focus on English.

### **Problems and difficulties**

Developments in language education at national and subnational levels are influenced by wider processes of globalisation and Europeanisation, such as the adoption of English as a corporate language in many of the larger businesses based in continental Europe and the way hierarchies of language are perceived as operating in international collaboration. This holds both for official contacts in EU institutions and for the informal channels of the internet, leisure interests, and travel. What is unclear in continental Europe is whether the learning and use of English remains an additive process, one that increases the repertoire of language competence of individuals and the society, or whether English threatens the viability of other languages through processes of domain loss and linguistic hierarchisation. In theory there ought to be no problem, because of the strong position of national languages such as German, Italian and Polish, and because of the declared policies of the EU. Article 22 of The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, which represents principles that all member states are committed to, states: 'The Union shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity' (also in the rejected draft Constitution, Articles I-3 and II-82). In reality there are fundamental paradoxes.

The first is that although the EU is essentially a Franco-German project, since France and Germany were founding member states and have continued to occupy the political high ground in shaping the integration of Europe, the use of English is expanding, and the French and German languages are on the defensive both at home and abroad. English is increasingly the dominant language both in EU affairs and in some societal domains in continental European countries.

The second paradox is that EU rhetoric proclaims support for multilingualism and cultural and linguistic diversity in official texts, and the equality of all official and working languages in the EU, but in practice there is *laissez faire* in the linguistic marketplace (Phillipson 2003). At the policy-making supranational level of EU institutions (the European Parliament, Commission, and Council), there is paralysis on broader language policy issues, apart from some support for regional minority languages, channelled through the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages. The proportion of the European budget (representing only 1% of national budgets) allocated to cultural concerns is modest, as compared with agriculture, infrastructure, and regional development. The rhetoric of diversity and linguistic equality is pitted against the unfree market and the forces that strengthen English. Young people are hugely exposed to US cultural products, but have little familiarity with the cultures of their partner states.

In the management of the internal affairs of EU institutions (European Parliament, Commission, Council of Ministers), there is equality between the 20 EU languages in some respects: all legislation is promulgated in parallel in all languages, and at the most important meetings, interpretation is provided between all languages. On the other hand in day-to-day affairs, French and English dominate, and English is increasingly the language in which documents are drafted and discussed. Some governments are keen to save money by not insisting on use of their languages, which has led interpreters for Danish and Swedish to fear that these languages will disappear as languages spoken in EU institutions within a decade. Many users of the EU language services see languages as serving purely instrumental purposes, whereas there is no doubt that the French (earlier) and British (now) regard use of their language as the default language as giving them a political competitive advantage. The language services are subjected to internal reviews of quality and efficiency, but there has never been an in-depth survey of how equality between speakers of different languages might be ensured in a variety of types of communication. This is a crucial issue of access and legitimacy in dealings between a European institution and citizens in each member state. It becomes more important as more languages are added (with Irish an official language and Spanish regional languages accorded restricted rights in 2005), and when pragmatic, economic considerations weigh more heavily than ensuring transparency and living up to a democratic ideal of equality irrespective of mother tongue. Within the EU, the language issue has been described as ‘explosive’ (French Members of the European Parliament) and as ‘the most emotional topic in the EU’ (German head of mission in Brussels), but work has begun to promote coordination between the European Federation of National Institutions for Language, [www.eurfedling.org](http://www.eurfedling.org). When there is this much uncertainty at the level of decision-makers, it is not surprising that *laissez faire* policies serve to strengthen the position of English.

### **Future directions**

A third paradox is that foreign languages have traditionally been learned in conjunction with cultural familiarisation, and although English is in countless ways a feature of British and US culture and globalisation processes, it is increasingly used by non-natives for purposes which have nothing to do with Anglophonic cultural norms. This has led to research into ‘English as a Lingua Franca’ in order to chart how this type of communication departs from native speaker norms (Seidlhofer, 2004). This might at some point have pedagogical implications, but analysis of ‘lingua

franca' English is still exploratory. The term 'lingua franca' is also deceptive if it refers to asymmetrical interaction between first and second language users of English. To a large extent foreign language learning is being expected, like much of education, to produce a European 'Knowledge society' serving economic needs, but there is some critical foreign language pedagogy (Guilherme, 2002). Dendrinos and Mitsikopoulou (2004) argue persuasively for a paradigm shift in foreign language education, with a different target than native speaker competence: contemporary realities necessitate a 'multilingual ethos of communication', reflecting and constituting a world which gives voice to different discourses, one that acknowledges that discourses, not least on language policy and foreign language education, are neither ideologically nor politically neutral.

## References

Ammon, U. (ed.): 2001, *The dominance of English as a language of science. Effects on other languages and language communities*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin.

Bondebjerg, I.: 2003, *Culture, media and globalisation*, in *Humanities – essential research for Europe*, Danish Research Council for the Humanities, Copenhagen, 71-88.

Council of Europe: 2001, *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Council of Europe: 2004, *Filling the frame. Five years of monitoring the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities*, Strasbourg.

Dendrinos, B. and Mitsikopoulou, B. (eds.): 2004, *Policies of linguistic pluralism and the teaching of languages in Europe, Metaixmio, and the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens*.

Grenfell, M., Kelly, M. and Jones, D.: 2003, *The European language teacher. Recent trends and future developments in teacher education*, Peter Lang, Bern.

Guilherme, M.: 2002, *Critical citizens for an intercultural world. Foreign language education as cultural politics*, Multilingual Matters, Clevedon.

Hellekjaer, G. O.: 2004, *Unprepared for English medium instruction: A critical look at beginner students* In R. Wilkinson (ed.) *Integrating content and language: Meeting the challenge of a multilingual higher education*, Maastricht University, the Netherlands, 147-161.

Monbiot, G.: 2000, *Captive state. The corporate takeover of Britain*. Macmillan, London.

Phillipson, R.: 2002, review of Ammon 2001, *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, Vol. 1, no. 2, 163-169.

Phillipson, R.: 2003, *English-only Europe? Challenging language policy*, Routledge, London.

Phillipson, R.: 2006, *English, a cuckoo in the European higher education nest of languages?* *European Journal of English Studies*, 10/1, 13-32.

Seidlhofer, B.: 2004, Research perspectives on teaching English as a lingua franca, *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 24, 209-239.

Trim, J.: 2002, Foreign language policies in Europe, with special reference to the roles of the Council of Europe and the European Union, in S.J. Baker (ed.), *Language policy: Lessons from global models*, Monterey Institute of International Studies. Monterey.

Williams, G. 2005, *Sustaining linguistic diversity in Europe. Evidence from the Euromosaic project*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wilkinson, R.: 2004, *Integrating content and language. Meeting the challenge of a multilingual higher education*, Maastricht University Press, Maastricht.

Wilson, D.: 2002, *The Englishisation of academe: A Finnish perspective*, University of Jyväskylä Language Centre, Jyväskylä.

#### Cross-references

Volume 1:     Language Education and Globalisation  
                  The Politics of English Language Teaching  
                  School Language Policies  
                  Teaching Language and Power  
                  The Economics of Language Education

Volume 2:     Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)  
                  Foreign Language Learning in Europe: The Common European Framework

#### KEYWORDS

Foreign language learning

European Union

Council of Europe

Linguistic diversity

Official language

Language policy

Minority language rights

Content and Language Integrated Learning

English as a Lingua Franca