

EUROPEAN LANGUAGE POLICIES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGE COMPETENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Maria-Anca MAICAN¹

Abstract: *The purpose of the present paper is to offer an overview of the language policies proposed by the Council of Europe and the European Commission and implemented at European level over the last decades. In this context, reference is going to be made to the language competences that students are expected to have at the end of the cycles of education, with emphasis on higher education, as well as to teaching methods which have proven to be particularly efficient as regards languages for specific purposes.*

Key words: *language policy, foreign language, language for specific purposes, teaching methods.*

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the European Union is home to 513 million people with very diverse cultural, economic, social and linguistic backgrounds, this population being expected to increase in the future especially due to natural growth, migration and the increasing life expectancy. Twenty four of the languages spoken by the inhabitants of the EU member states are considered “official languages”, with English, French and German being not only official, but also “procedural languages”, as they are used in the day-to-day activities of the EU institutions and in all the official documents issued. Apart from the official languages, a considerable number of EU citizens use over sixty regional or minority languages (europa.eu. *EU in figures; EU languages*).

Considering the figures above and the motto of the European Union, “*In varietate concordia*”, it does not come as a surprise that linguistic diversity and promotion of language learning are placed at the very core of the EU policies, together with other issues pertaining to the area “Education and training, young people, culture and sport”, as well as with issues related to agriculture, economic and general affairs, the EU relations with the rest of the world, competitiveness, employment, health and medical care, environment, justice and telecommunications.

¹ *Transilvania* University of Braşov, anca.maican@unitbv.ro

2. Language policies in Europe

With reference to languages, the respect for and desire to preserve all EU languages, lifelong language learning for all citizens, qualifications of specialist language teachers, flexibility of the school curricula, developing specialized structures for the training of foreign language teachers are just a few of the desiderata stated in the Action plan 2004-2006 of the European Commission (2004, p. 14).

However, the overt interest in foreign language learning in the united Europe was made clear earlier in official documents. Thus, the White Paper on Education and Training from 1995 underpins the general principles that have to be complied with in order for European citizens to be able to take full advantage of professional opportunities on the labour market and to successfully adapt to working and living environments in different cultures: "it is becoming necessary for everyone, irrespective of training and education routes chosen, to be able to acquire and keep up their ability to communicate in at least two Community languages in addition to their mother tongue. [...] In order to make for proficiency in three Community languages, it is desirable for foreign language learning to start at pre-school level. It seems essential for such teaching to be placed on a systematic footing in primary education, with the learning of a second Community foreign language starting in secondary school" (Commission of the European Communities, 1995, p. 51).

Drawing on these guidelines, the Barcelona European Summit from 2002 called for even further action in this field, a proposal being put forward for the teaching of at least two foreign languages in Europe from a very early age (European Commission, 2002, p. 44). The idea was resumed two years later in the European Commission's Action Plan.

In line with the language policies already mentioned, the EU has permanently encouraged the teaching of as wide a range of languages as possible, including regional, minority, national European languages and migrant ones, as well as those of the EU trading partners worldwide (European Commission, 2004, pp. 10, 22). Nonetheless, it has been admitted that the number of foreign languages actually taught and learnt in the EU is not impressive. According to recent statistics, English overwhelmingly prevails, with over 94% of the EU students studying this language, while only about a fifth of them are taught French, German and Spanish (in this order), and only 3% Russian or Italian, all other languages having lesser percentages (European Commission, 2019).

Following the implementation of the EU policies, the number of people studying foreign languages in the EU has risen constantly. Research shows that, although there are some differences in point of the age at which people start learning foreign languages, at least one foreign language is today mandatory in primary and lower-secondary education in every European country. The number of foreign languages studied during upper-secondary education rises, the proportion of students learning two or more foreign languages at this level being situated over 98% in seven EU countries (Luxembourg, France, Finland, Romania, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Slovenia), only four of the countries registering percentages lower than 25% (Italy, Ireland, Portugal and Greece) (European Commission, 2017 and 2018).

3. Language competences at higher education level

At higher education level, research has revealed that statistics about the extent to which foreign languages are taught and about the most studied foreign languages are unfortunately missing with reference to the EU. Nor are they available for the number of foreign language classes in the curricula for each language and year of study, either for Bachelor's or Master's degree programmes. But, considering the general process of internationalisation in universities, the growing number of student mobility and of the programmes of study delivered in a foreign language, the natural conclusion would be that universities have accommodated these phenomena by fostering the provision of foreign languages. However, statistics would be the only ones which could demonstrate if this is a sweeping conclusion or not.

With reference to the languages that should be taught, the European Language Council has argued that the decision depends on several factors, such as the language repertoire that students already have when coming to university, the language repertoire that the university and lecturers offer, the geographical location of the higher education institution, the higher education institution mission, vision and strategies for enhancing students' preparation for studies and mobility, and the graduates' employability and career prospects (2003, p. 4).

As acknowledged in outstanding European reports and research papers, the objective of teaching foreign languages at university is to develop students' language proficiency with a view to better preparing them for the labour market. Specialists seem to agree that the language level that students in non-language faculties should reach at the end of their Bachelor's degree should be at least B2 (Fortanet-Gómez, Räisänen, 2008). As regards receptive skills (listening and reading), the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) specifies that, at this level, this involves the students' ability to understand extended speech and lectures, to understand most TV news and current affairs programmes, to read articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular attitudes or viewpoints, to understand contemporary literary prose. With respect to productive skills (speaking and writing), this involves the students' ability to interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible, to take an active part in discussion in familiar contexts, accounting for and sustaining their views, to present clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of interest, to explain a viewpoint on a topical issue, to write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects, to write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view, to write letters highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences (European Language Council, 2003, p. 6; Council of Europe, 2003, p. 33-37).

Students involved in higher education need these language competences in all the four domains listed in the CEFR, sometimes simultaneously: the personal, the public, the occupational and the educational ones. Students need foreign languages in every day situations independent of professional contexts, while travelling abroad or networking with friends of other language background, to cope with academic activities involving foreign languages (responding to tasks set by the teacher, participating in

student mobility programmes, coping with subjects whose medium of instruction is a foreign language) and, as future working professionals, they need to communicate efficiently and effectively at the workplace (Council of Europe, 2003, pp. 54-57). Consequently, students should have appropriate command of both the language for general purposes (LGP) and the language for specific purposes (LSP) in the fields of their future profession. The former category represents the focus of foreign language education from kindergarten to upper-secondary education, being only tangentially dealt with in higher education. But, in compliance with the recommendations of the European Language Council, the core of foreign language teaching and learning in higher education should be represented by LSP (European Language Council, 2013, pp.7-8).

The advent of this type of specialised language is considered to be intrinsically linked to the progress in science and technology and the significant economic and political changes in the second half of the 20th century. Starting from the absolute characteristics provided by Dudley-Evans and St. John for the English for Specific Purposes (ESP), we can paraphrase that languages for specific purposes “are designed to meet specific needs of the learner” and “make use of the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines [they] serve”, focusing on the “language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities”. In addition, they may use a different teaching methodology from that of general English, the target population is generally represented by students in tertiary education or employees in professional organizations, the students level generally being intermediate or advanced (1998, pp.1-5).

Given these characteristics, the task of the teachers of LSP is far from being an easy one. First of all, they have to equip students with what has been called “the linguistic competence”, involving grammar structures, general lexis, function words, multi-word units, collocations, as well as the specialised words used in a specific field, i.e. the jargon (Frendo, 2005, pp. 8-10). But, more importantly, in order to meet students’ needs, language teachers have to go beyond the linguistic competence and provide students with the necessary contexts for practising the language, thus enhancing their “discourse competence”, the one which really enables them to communicate effectively.

4. Recommended teaching methods

The emphasis which needs to be put on language in context, the specific present and future needs of the language learners, their intermediate to advanced level of the language led to the teachers’ searching for appropriate teaching and learning methods. In this respect, communicative and post-communicative language teaching seem to represent the solution. Some of the premises of the former category are: the main objective is to develop students’ communicative competence, language skills are more important than teaching content, meaning is more important than form, active participation and affective involvement in the learning process motivate the student and enhance learning, spontaneous practice is more efficient than mechanical repetition, language is a mere medium for communication, language learning should be task-oriented, language must be learned with the help of authentic material. The post-

communicative turn adds the following characteristics for language learning: task and context orientation, learning achievement through the negotiation of meaning, cultural awareness and learner autonomy (Vizental, 2008, pp. 36-37, 44).

Among the teaching approaches which comply with most of the characteristics mentioned above, one has gained particular significance over the last years, being insistently recommended in the European documents ever since 1995. It is called “content and integrated language learning” (CLIL) and is considered to originate in a Canadian experiment focused on immersion teaching in the '70s and '80s. Whether the immersion teaching was total, covering the entire curriculum, or partial, covering just certain subjects, the programme was considered an utter success, a fact that has stimulated significant research on the topic not only in Canada, but also in Europe.

Starting with the '90s, the phrase “content and language integrated learning” has been used with reference to the interdisciplinary approach which “seeks to develop proficiency in both the non-language subject and the language in which this is taught, attaching the same importance to each” (The Eurydice European Unit, 2006, p.8). In time, CLIL has been used by both foreign language teachers and by teachers of other subjects, as part of programmes of study taught in a foreign language.

For the classes whose main objective is foreign language teaching, the most frequently encountered form taken by CLIL is that of the peer-teaching between language and non-language teachers. This involves that specialists in a certain field teach the subject matter of their course or seminar in a foreign language, while the language teacher assists them in this pursuit, generally intervening only in the second part of the class, when the processing of the discourse and the language identification take place.

Being given that the language teacher is a specialist in philology and generally has only limited knowledge of the students' future area of expertise, the cooperation with a non-language teacher who integrates specialised knowledge and vocabulary in the foreign language class would be entirely welcome, undoubtedly enhancing the authenticity of the tasks and ensuring practical reinforcement of the language.

5. Conclusions

The language policies initiated at European level before the turn of the 21st century represent the starting point for the provision of well-defined and coherent programmes for setting standards as regards foreign language teaching and learning in the EU, with a view to fostering the European identity and the intercultural dialogue in this area, and, most importantly, to enhancing European citizens' career prospects and employability.

The increasing importance given to foreign languages, to developing language competences that should support students in their academic activities in their home universities and outside the country, as well as in their future professions has triggered a re-consideration of the way in which the teaching and learning of foreign languages should take place at all education levels. This has encompassed a closer look at the national curricula, at the competences which should be developed to encourage effective communication and at the most efficient teaching methods, considering students' levels and needs. However, translating theory into practice could not be

possible without consistent future European programmes which should continue to provide practical guidelines for the implementation of the proposals, offering a framework for sharing the know-how and for developing appropriate teaching strategies.

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