Bilingualism, language policy, and the European Union

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At the beginning of 1999, one of the leading foreign-language journals in the Federal Republic of Germany published an article titled “Der Niedergang der Bilingual Education in den USA,” reporting on the decline of bilingual education in the United States. Proposition 227 was mentioned, the 1998 referendum in California that resulted in a ban of bilingual education in that state, as was Theodore Roosevelt, who said at the beginning of this century, “[w]e have room for but one language here, and that is the English language. . . . We must have but one flag. We must also have but one language” (Pilzecker 1999: 83).

The article also mentioned politicians, researchers like Krashen (1996), and ethnic groups, for example, Latinos, who are still in favor of bilingualism. But the overall impression was that English-only gives you better educational and economic chances than bilingual education. This has happened at a time when a growing interest in bilingual education can be observed in Europe, particularly in Germany. The reason for this is obvious. The European Union (EU) is well on its way from being an abstract political concept to becoming a concrete everyday reality. In January 1999 the euro became the official currency for most of the fifteen countries of the EU. Europeans can now pay in the same currency, but they cannot all speak the same language.

The current European language situation. Let me give you a brief introduction to the language situation in the EU. Of its 370 million citizens, about 25 percent speak German as their mother tongue, about 17 percent French or English each, 16 percent Italian, 11 percent Spanish, and 6 percent Dutch. The rest of the languages within the union, for example, Swedish, Finnish, Portuguese, and Danish, are used by less than 3 percent each of the EU’s citizens. A closer look at the language-skill abilities of Europeans shows that about half of the entire population can speak English, either as their mother tongue or as a foreign language, 34 percent speak German, 31 percent French, 18 percent Italian, and 14 percent Spanish. In other words, 51 percent of EU citizens cannot speak an official union language other than their mother tongue. This is alarming because communication is a necessary prerequisite for a working political, economic, and social community.

Foreign language teaching and learning is, of course, different in the various countries of the union. While in Germany all children have to learn at least one foreign language at school, other countries offer no compulsory foreign language instruction at all at this level. Of the more than eighty million pupils in the European Union, 89 percent have studied a language; 11 percent have not. But the disturbing fact is that in spite of all instructional efforts, 35 percent of the pupils cannot hold a conversation in the foreign language they have learned and 24 percent are still unable to speak it. This is simply due to the fact that foreign-language teaching in Europe still follows the traditional goals of educational values that no longer exist—those of the nineteenth century. In spite of curricular innovations like "communicative competence" or "language acquisition" (instead of "learning"), grammar instruction, translation, and a focus on literature still dominate the foreign-language classrooms. One hundred years ago Wilhelm Viëtor, a prominent German language educator, became very famous when he challenged his profession by saying that foreign-language teaching must find a new orientation different from the learning of the classical languages Latin and Greek (Viëtor 1882). One hundred years later language instruction in schools still hasn't found that orientation. Textbooks certainly are more colorful, learning materials are available in a greater variety, and teaching strategies have become more flexible. Nevertheless, grammar instruction is still very popular; 40 to 60 percent of the time available in high schools for language instruction is devoted to formal—and not communicative—aspects of language (Zimmermann 1984: 31). This is why many people, after having left school, study the same languages again in adult education classes, private language schools, or industrial in-service courses in order to learn what they really need language-wise for their jobs and leisure time. No wonder, therefore, that another prominent language professor in Germany recently proposed discontinuing language teaching at school level altogether because language teachers were obviously not in a position to teach modern languages for the purpose of everyday communication (Edmondson 1999).

In order to qualify EU citizens linguistically for the world of tomorrow, various proposals have been made, all of which include strategies for a new language policy in Europe. The Commission of the European Union in Brussels has suggested that all young Europeans should learn at least two foreign languages at school. One of its slogans is: "We can all learn to speak three languages." In many countries this is quite normal, and it, therefore, should become a standard language requirement. Only in this way, says the commission, can one take full advantage of European citizenship, move more easily between countries, and more easily find a job in the single market, because linguistic skills are attractive to employers. However, most of the programs sponsored by EU funding—like Lingua, SOKRATES, LEONARDO DA VINCI or TEMPUS—are primarily aimed at persons older than sixteen or eighteen, for example, university students, apprentices, or trainees.

Another very popular suggestion is to start foreign-language teaching in primary school. In some European countries, for example, in Austria and some of the German federal states, this is already common practice where qualified teachers and appropriate learning materials are available. So far, language learning at primary level starts in the third year of schooling. It could start much earlier, as has been successfully done in a private German school system since 1919 (Jaffke 1994; Jaffke and Maier 1997). It is, therefore, a welcome decision that, beginning with the school year 1999–2000, Baden-Württemberg was the first state in the Federal Republic of Germany to officially introduce foreign-language instruction when children start school at the age of six.

A further proposal for a new language policy in European schools is to replace long-term language learning of seven to nine years of instruction with short-term intensive or compact courses of no longer than four years, so that a greater number of languages can be offered—not just English, French, and German as in most European Union member states. It was also suggested that multilingual comprehension among people speaking different languages be introduced, although nobody really knows how to teach languages for listening comprehension purposes only.

Last but not least, the idea came up to let native speakers exclusively take over language instruction in European schools (Freudenstein 1996: 53). Among the traditional language-teacher profession this is, as you can imagine, a very unpopular view, but in a future United States of Europe it seems to be a realistic perspective. The entire population of the European Union enjoys freedom of residence and can work in whichever member state they want to. So all it needs is a greater flexibility among language teachers to move from one country to another, similar to someone in the United States who moves from Virginia to Florida or from Ohio to California.

However, none of these initiatives has so far resulted in any basic, comprehensive change of language policy across borders, and language instruction and language methodology have only been marginally affected. In order to prepare Europeans linguistically for their multicultural world of tomorrow, other ways have therefore to be found for the European Union to become a unity in spite of all diversity. A promising one seems to be bilingual education.

A European concept of bilingual education. When we speak of bilingualism in the context of school instruction in Europe, we do not think of persons who master two languages equally well since the time they first learn to speak. Bilingual education in Germany primarily means the learning of other subjects through the use of a foreign language so that the new language becomes a tool rather than an end in itself. Normally this kind of bilingual education starts in the third year of high school, after two years of intensified foreign-language learning when pupils are twelve or thirteen years old. Geography and history are the most popular subjects, but biology and mathematics are also part of the bilingual curriculum. The languages most commonly chosen are English and French. This is in agreement with the results of a public opinion poll conducted among citizens of the European Union. According to this survey, 78 percent said English would be useful to learn and 45 percent voted for French. German was ranked third (34 percent), followed by Spanish (15 percent). The number of schools in Germany offering bilingual options is still very small. Out of more than 63,000 schools, only 200 cover subjects in another language than in German; this is considerably less than half a percent. One hundred twenty of the schools run programs in English, fifty in French, and the rest of the schools have either chosen Dutch, Spanish, Czech, Italian, or Russian. Nevertheless, the popularity of bilingual educational institutions is constantly growing, and so are the number of articles in professional journals that concentrate on the chances and problems of bilingualism in a primarily mother-tongue environment.

The case for bilingual education. Wherever schools offer bilingual schemes, there have been only good reports and positive results about their work. Teachers involved in bilingual instruction find that their pupils are highly motivated and more interested in a foreign language than in traditional, textbook-oriented courses. This is mainly due to the fact that the learning process is concentrated on subject matter that seems to be of greater relevance to those who study it. When using English, pupils are no longer forced to describe the position of pronoun objects, to think about the use of the past perfect in indirect speech, or to distinguish between “can” or “be able.” Rather, they learn about the life of people in other countries, are involved in project work, or investigate historical facts that they want to know—not because the linguistic progression of their foreign-language textbook has given the opportunity to deal with them by chance. Subjects taught and learned in another language are part of the regular curriculum. In my view, language policy in Europe should be based on this model. Why should it not be possible in a multicultural and multilingual society to introduce bilingual instruction of the form described as the standard educational scheme? If foreign-language learning starts at primary level, where language learning cannot be based on cognitive insights but is focused on children’s interests and is more play-oriented, then there are good chances that after four years of language instruction, various school subjects could be taught in a language other than the mother tongue. This means that each school in Europe could become an institution of bilingual education, not only for highly talented children, but for each and everyone. In this way children would learn to use and accept different languages in a natural way for their general education and not purely for the sake of learning another language for grammatical, literary, or cultural reasons. Being able to communicate equally well in at least two languages is a sound foundation for communication in everyday situations and at the workplace in the European Union.

Problems to be solved. To introduce a bilingual educational system throughout Europe is a difficult task that will certainly take a long time to implement. Let me just mention a few problems that have to be solved in the decades to come. First of all, there must be a political will for an educational reform of this kind. Equally important is public support. If politicians, educationalists, and people in Europe do not believe that bilingual education can better qualify pupils for the challenges of tomorrow, then it will not work. Another issue that has to be discussed and decided upon is the relationship between subject matter and foreign language, particularly in connection with the evaluation process. Are historically relevant insights or language skills to be given priority? A bilingual school system also needs entirely new teaching materials. Here we are in somewhat the same position that Krashen (1996: 67) described for the United States: “The biggest problem, in my view, is the absence of books, both in the first and second language.” Whether authentic textbooks in various subjects from other countries serve the purpose is still not known yet. Most probably new media and telecommunication networks will play an increasing role as instructional tools in the future. Finally, teacher training has to be reconsidered and reorganized. Teachers for bilingual schools should be trained to teach their mother tongue as a foreign language, and they should also have studied a school subject that can be taught in a foreign language. This means that in the long run, only native speakers are really qualified for work in a bilingual school.

Conclusion. I know that my views on a future language policy for and in Europe are not very popular at the moment, particularly among foreign-language teachers who fear losing the jobs they have trained for. Teachers who today still have to study philology, historical linguistics (e.g., Old and Middle English), and who speak the language they are supposed to teach as a foreign language themselves are most certainly not the best instructors in an educational system for the twenty-first century. If we really want to establish a multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual society in Europe, we have to implement reforms that are unpopular. I hope that fifty years from now those reforms will be taken for granted.

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