

Language Policy in the EU and in Germany

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EU 及びドイツにおける言語政策

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Language education in Germany

The EU is now the world's largest market, with a population of more than 450 million. It comprises 27 countries and recognizes 23 official languages. Throughout the EU and its former institutions, language education has always been important for integration and mutual understanding.

Being German, I would like to concentrate on language education in Germany, whose language is mother-tongue to the biggest group of EU-citizens, 118 million. In Germany, the 16 *Bundesländer* (states) have exclusive responsibility in the field of education. Therefore, there are many different school systems, however, in every state the starting point is *Grundschule* (elementary school), which starts at age six for a period of 4 years (6 in Berlin and Brandenburg). Pupils and their parents have the choice of which school they want to attend, provided their grades are good enough and that the school will accept the pupil.

At age 10 students must select either a *Hauptschule*, *Realschule*, or *Gymnasium*. The less academic *Hauptschule* (to grade 9 or 10) leads to vocational education, the intermediate *Realschule* (to grade 10) leads to a technical or business school, and the academically oriented *Gymnasium* (to grade 12/13) (with *Abitur* as exit exam, qualifying for university) leads to a university education. In some states there is also the choice of *Gesamtschule* with all the options of the three "tracks" mentioned above. *Gymnasium* is now attended by close to 45% of all pupils.

In the past, pupils started their first foreign language, which was often English, in grade 5. The second foreign language had to be chosen in grade 7, which was usually a choice between French or Latin. In grade 9, pupils could choose a third foreign language, which was again a choice between French and Latin. The result was that a majority of pupils learned English for 9 years, French for 7 and Latin for 3 or 5 years. Only after the successful completion of the *Abitur*, was permission to enter university granted. In order to pass the *Abitur* at least two foreign languages had to be studied.

Today, the study of two foreign languages is still required, however the choice of languages has increased as has the depth and diversity of language study. Since the school-year 2003/2004 the

first foreign language is taught from elementary school on. Using *Bundesland* (state) of Baden-Württemberg as an example one can see some clear differences. This “state” is located in the south-west of Germany, sharing a long border with neighboring France. Elementary schools close to the border have a long history of teaching a foreign language, namely French, to their students.

In Germany, in fact in all countries of the EU, the school-year starts in fall. This year, 2007/2008, sees the first generation of graduates from elementary school, who have already learned a foreign language for 4 years, and will continue to do so in grade 5. At the same time, or at the latest in grade 6, they will start their second foreign language, which will be English, if it was not their first one, or French, Latin or Russian. In *Gymnasium*, in grade 8, they will be able to choose a third foreign language out of a range of languages like French, Latin, Russian, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian or Greek. For students with high language ability it will be possible from grade 10 to start a fourth foreign language with a choice of Chinese, Hebrew, French, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Turkish, Latin and Greek. Of course, how many languages can be offered will depend on the school or better on how much the school is linked with other *Gymnasiums* in the area. However, a course is usually set up, when it has been chosen by at least 6 pupils. This was already an option in the old system. In several bi- or multilingual *Gymnasiums* not only foreign languages are taught, but content classes, like biology, geography are taught in English and/or in French.

Why foreign languages are taught so early - A path to diversity

In 2003, as part of an initiative started by Viviane Reding, a Luxembourgish and then Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth, Media, and Sports, the EU launched a program called: “Mother tongue plus two foreign languages”. Its goal was that foreign languages should be taught to children at a very early stage. This is very much in line with the overall motto of the EU which reads: United in Diversity.

Ms. Reding supported her initiative by stressing, that “encouraging communication and mutual understanding, while safeguarding diversity and identity are the two principles at the heart of the European Union’s action in the area of language learning.” She further explains that these two principles are well reflected in the teaching of at least two foreign languages to children at a very early age. “Multilingualism is an opportunity we cannot pass up ... Companies clearly need people capable of communicating in their clients’ languages and this means that multilingualism has become an undeniable strength - if not a vital qualification - in the job market.”

Ms. Reding went to point out the disadvantages of only one lingua franca: “True mutual understanding and deep appreciation of another culture require dialogue in the local language. If the foreign language being learned is a lingua franca - usually English, the link between language and culture is lacking. The lingua franca does not equip the speaker to deal with all

country-specific situations ... Furthermore, English is not necessarily the priority lingua franca for everyone. In many cases, the language of the neighboring country is more important. The linguistic diversity of Europe means that no single solution will ever fit every situation.”(1)

Ms. Reding’s points are also supported by Leonard Orban, Commissioner for Multilingualism. He adds: “Multilingualism makes a real contribution to the competitiveness of the European economy ... A study on the "Effects on the European Economy of Shortages of Foreign Language Skills in Enterprise" made by CILT (UK National Centre for Languages) suggests real lost business opportunities due to the lack of language skills in enterprises. ... Language learning is a crucial vector for intercultural awareness and understanding. Therefore, the contribution of multilingualism to intercultural dialogue must be guaranteed. ... it is only by learning languages that one can move from a *multi*-cultural society to a truly *inter*-cultural one. 2008 will be the European year of intercultural dialogue.” (2)

The feasibility of the program “Mother tongue plus two foreign languages” is backed by the results of the 2006 Special Eurobarometer which shows a solid base of 28% of European citizens who claim to already know two foreign languages. The survey, carried out every 5 years, reports the following: “56% of citizens in the EU Member States are able to hold a conversation in one language apart from their mother tongue. This is 9 points more than in 2001. With respect to the goal for every EU citizen to have knowledge of two languages in addition to their mother tongue, 28% of the respondents stated that they speak two foreign languages well enough to have a conversation. This is especially the case in Luxembourg (92%), the Netherlands (75%) and Slovenia (71%). 11% of the respondents indicate that they speak at least three foreign languages.” (3)

The path to the 2003 initiative and the goal of plurilingualism/ multilingualism

As has been stressed before, an immense diversity in languages is one of Europe’s characteristics. The language policy division of the Council of Europe (CoE), founded in 1949, has always been very active in promoting language education and mutual understanding.

The programs and attentions of the CoE had, from the beginning, been focused on the democratization of language learning. Since the 1970’s projects of the CoE have increasingly addressed the social and political dimensions of language learning, focusing on language education for democratic citizenship, diversification in language learning, improving coherence and transparency in language provision, and promoting the language education rights of minorities. A European Language Portfolio (ELP) was introduced in 1991, as one step toward giving language back to the learners. In the European Year of Languages (2001) a comprehensive language instrument called the “Common European Framework of References for Languages” (4) (CEF or CEFR) was introduced. A European Union Council Resolution (November 2001) recommended the use of this Council of Europe instrument in setting up systems of validation of

language competences. The CEFR is now used together with the ELP.

What is the CEFR?

The CEFR is a paradigm shift. No longer is the goal of language learning to become like the nearly non-attainable native speaker. The responsibility of learning is now clearly with the learner. They can become autonomous and responsible for their own language learning. The CEFR is a tool, a guide, providing 6 well described stages in 5 competencies (A1-A2 basic users, B1-B2 independent users, C1-C2 proficient users) for each of the European languages taught in various learning situations. In addition to European languages, there are also stages and competencies outlined for Japanese and Chinese. The CoE states that: "The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) provides a basis for the mutual recognition of language qualifications, thus facilitating educational and occupational mobility. It is increasingly used in the reform of national curricula and by international consortia for the comparison of language certificates. The CEFR advocates life-long-learning, not only for young students but also for adults, as it is also supported by the lifelong learning program (LLL) of the EU. It is also a document which describes in a comprehensive manner i) the competencies necessary for communication, ii) the related knowledge and skills and iii) the situations and domains of communication. The CEFR is of particular interest to course designers, textbook writers, testers, teachers and teacher trainers - in fact to all who are directly involved in language teaching and testing. It facilitates a clear definition of teaching and learning objectives and methods and provides the necessary tools for assessment of proficiency."(5)

The LLL

Based on the CEFR language learners can assess their own language skills in the language passport of the ELP. The focus is always on what the learner can do or has achieved and not the opposite. The CEFR together with the ELP are gradually becoming standard in the language teaching in the EU. Language learning is seen as a lifelong learning process. This is also supported by the LLL (Lifelong learning program) 2007-2013 of the EU, for which the sum of 7 billion Euros is allocated.

There are more than 4 subprograms that support language learning in different settings, at different levels and for different people. Everybody has the right to apply. The Comenius program, for example, supports teaching and learning up to the upper level of secondary education. It supports town-twinning and school-twinning, which offer students an invaluable opportunity to learn not only a foreign language but also mutual understanding by communicating with students from different countries. The Comenius program also offers common training programs to teachers from various countries.

Another program called the Erasmus program is geared to support teaching and learning at the tertiary level. Students can apply for language programs, especially for non-major languages of smaller countries or communities in the EU. Therefore, students, who want to learn such a language and study in the country in question, will receive an intensive course and financial support for their studies to up to 12 months. (6)

Conclusion

The language diversity in the EU is seen as an opportunity so children are taught foreign languages at a very early age. The launch of the EU initiative “mother tongue plus two foreign languages” supports this policy. The grounding for this is now the CEFR in combination with the ELP, which give autonomy to the language learner, focus on the can-do aspect and are the basis for the development of comparable curricula across borders. They also stress the lifelong learning aspect, which can also be found in the LLP and its sub-programs like Comenius and Erasmus. These support teachers as well as students in their endeavors to network and improve their teaching and learning.

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