

IT'S A KNOCK-OUT! CULTURES 'SANS FRONTIÈRES'

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"Languages are ... the key to knowing other people. Proficiency in languages helps to build up the feeling of being European with all its cultural wealth and diversity, and of understanding between the citizens of Europe" (CEC, 1995; 48)

We are living in an ever-widening Europe in which frontiers of the formal political kind are being dispensed with and economical barriers gradually broken down. Our living patterns are converging under the influence of economic internationalization and we are increasingly exposed to the presence, ways, languages and products of others. Nevertheless, our societies are characterized in general by a lack of intercultural mobility and exchange, and by an insistence on seeing others not only as different from ourselves but also as conforming to preset national patterns. Despite the imminence of the Single Currency, and Economic and Monetary Union with their implications for integration in spheres other than the economic, most Europeans continue to see the European Union as distant and irrelevant, and other Europeans as foreign and somewhere else. This paper questions the role of foreign language teaching in this process of integration and concludes that instead of engaging in a real attempt to grapple with the implications of economic, political and social integration, language educators are guilty of colluding in a friendly contest between stereotypes.

Taking as a starting point the approximation between lived cultures within the European Union, then, I shall consider three stages of development in the relationship between language teaching and European integration:

Firstly, I shall trace the growing importance of education and language learning within a European agenda which has gradually adopted language education as a support to its economic and political aims.

Secondly, I shall consider the changing context of language teaching and learning within the European Union and the changing motivations which have grown out of it.

And thirdly, given these two broad bands of influence, I shall draw some speculative conclusions as to the need for a fundamental shift within the language classroom from a narrow emphasis on linguistic skill and

cultural knowledge to a broader approach which would include a truly cultural dimension.

1 - Education, foreign languages and the European Union.

Language teaching and learning has long been recognised as a way of getting to know others and reducing cultural barriers to understanding between peoples. It is not surprising, then, that representatives of the member states of the Council of Europe agreed in 1954 "that foreign language study was to be promoted because 'a greater understanding of one another among the peoples of Europe' would further the Council's aim, which was the achievement 'of a greater unity between its Members'." (Van Ek, 1977; 1) From then on, foreign language study has been a low-profile but consistent feature in the processes of European integration.

Educational affairs were only taken up officially by the European Communities, however, in the early 1970s and the first community-wide action programme in the field of education was adopted in 1976. This focused attention on three main priority areas, namely: the lack of information between member states which hindered cooperation between them; the problems of social marginalisation and discrimination, particularly related to illiteracy and unemployment, and the need to facilitate the transition from school to active life. While expanding to face new problems, these three areas have continued to form the basis of community action on education. The creation of information networks, the fight against social exclusion and the, perhaps primary, concern with increasing economic efficiency and competitiveness within the Community have remained the principle pillars of intervention in the educational field.

This first programme included the teaching and learning of community languages in its agenda, and this was adopted in a limited way primarily as a means of countering the socio-cultural problems faced by migrant workers and their families who were an integral part of a community which aimed to become a common market.

The relaunch of the EC in the 1980s led to a resurgence of interest in educational matters. During the period 1984-1991, the EC set about reorganising itself on the one hand as a competitive, economic entity and on the other, as a community of nations. In its drive towards the Single European Market (SEM) "an area without internal frontiers in which the

free movement of goods, persons, services and capital is ensured" (Art 8a, The Single European Act), foreign language and culture skills were recognised as essential contributors to the desired mobility and flexibility, as well as to the commercial exchange and competitiveness which were necessary for the success of the endeavour.

But the launching of the Single Market Programme was more than an economic exercise. Despite Margaret Thatcher, the plans for establishing the SEM were never detached from the will to build a community of Europeans; rather, the latter was subsumed within the former and a community of Europeans was to be built upon the foundations of the SEM. Clearly, no community could be built without enhanced powers of mutual understanding and awareness. The objectives laid down by the European Council in 1989 included the establishment of: "a multi-cultural Europe, to be achieved through a European dimension in education, including the promotion of multilingualism." (Preston, 1991; 49)

Thus, the primary emphasis on pragmatic language and culture skills for more effective cross-frontier communication within an increasingly single economic community was supplemented by the educational aim of promoting understanding of the European idea and awareness of other cultures and languages within a multicultural Community.

The Treaty on European Union (TEU), which came into effect in 1993, included amongst its modifications of the original Treaty of Rome, Article 126 on Education, Training and Youth. This states that Community action shall be aimed, among other things, at "developing the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of the languages of the Member States" (Art. 126, TEU). In this way it made official the need to apply educational processes to the building of a European consciousness and the relevance of the teaching and learning of languages to this task. However, at the same time, the Treaty underlined the sovereignty of Member States in educational matters, thus reaffirming the principle of subsidiarity in this area and the intention to respect the cultural and linguistic diversity of the Member States. "The Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organization of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity." (Art. 126, TEU)

Since 1993, European documentation concerning education has continued to focus on the need to enhance mobility, flexibility and employability in the European workforce while highlighting the importance of language learning to the overall aims of integration. The economic recessions of the early 1990s and the critical level of unemployment across the Community centred attention on the need to adapt educational processes to the changing work environment created by the so-called 'information age'. One of the principal themes in European documentation concerning education over this period was the issue of transnational mobility. Clearly in a citizen's Europe based on a free market economy, mobility was to be promoted on political as well as economic grounds. What's more, mobility was seen as a way of achieving 'a growing European consciousness'. In the words of the European Commission: "Transnational mobility also looks to foster improvement of the understanding of other European societies and cultures; it also enhances social skills of individuals, who learn how to communicate and live within those societies and to respect diversity ..."

(CEC Green Paper, 1996; 1)

One of the obstacles to such mobility was identified as 'the lack of knowledge of a foreign language' as well as 'certain cultural aspects' (Obstacle 15; CEC Green Paper, 1996; 22). This was to be countered by the learning of at least two community languages, cultural preparation for mobility actions, and pilot actions to raise awareness of 'European Citizenship'. (Line of Action 8; CEC Green Paper, 1996; 29).

European concern also rested on the need to prepare for the 'learning society' - "a society which invests in knowledge, a society of teaching and learning, in which each individual will build up his or her own qualification" (CEC, 1995). One of the five general objectives laid down in the European Commission White Paper, *Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society*, was: "Proficiency in three community languages". These are described as a precondition of the European citizen's ability to benefit fully from the opportunities open to them in the single market - "this language proficiency must be backed up by the ability to adapt to working and living environments characterised by different cultures" (CEC, 1995; 48)

To summarize, then, the 1990s reveal a growing concern on the part of the European Commission with encouraging a linguistic and cultural proficiency which would allow the European Community to reach its full potential in diversity while realizing its economic possibilities at the same time. As before, information exchange, standardisation of qualifications and

evaluation systems (ECTS), staff and student mobility (e.g. LINGUA, SOCRATES) have been the methods chosen in the promotion of a sense of Europeaness and the attainment of a multi-cultural Europe.

This activity may have been insufficient, however. Despite the topical, beneficial effects of student and teacher mobility, and increasing access to information through technology, young people remain to a large extent trapped within educational institutions and structures which have largely resisted approximation. Educational affairs and foreign language teaching in particular have been retained within the control of national educational authorities, and responsibility for the content and implementation of education is left to the will and educational culture of each Member State. Within this scenario, language teaching tends to maintain its highly 'national' character. While curricula, programmes, methodology, and evaluation have in some cases been susceptible to harmonisation, content, coursebooks, and teachers conform to essentially nationally-established criteria.

Though the European Union sees language learning as a necessary support to the building of a pluricultural community, its policies indicate that such learning will take place of its own accord and as necessary in each national context. Not only does it take no direct action at national level, but many of its own documents support and promote the view of Europeans as typecast in their special roles and identities. (e.g. *Portrait of our Europe*; *Exploring Europe*)

Its policies and recommendations leave us with two arguably contradictory directions in which to proceed: on the one hand, they encourage us to establish the basis for a sense of shared identity, based on shared experience and histories, common values and belief systems, and a shared vision of future affluence and security. They pull us towards the enactment of the European dimension of our selves and others. Besides the 'natural' processes of harmonisation encouraged in the ways mentioned above, teaching about the European Union and disseminating its languages are considered sufficient to build a sense of community and belonging. On the other hand, we are pulled towards the celebration of our diversity, on which the wealth of European culture depends. To quote the Commission, 'Europe encompasses a kaleidoscope of languages, cultures, traditions and landscapes. Its diversity is a testament to the innovation and creativity of its inhabitants, peoples who despite maintaining their differences, have many values in common' (CEC, 1996; 69). In the process of promoting this diversity, we are encouraged to see ourselves as different from each other,

easily encapsulated within our national and regional customs and folklore,

While the former leads us to over-emphasize sameness ('europeanness') at the expense of diversity (both of the insider and the outsider), the latter leads us to the folklorisation of our difference. Neither is an adequate response to the problems which will continue to be crucial over the coming decades - how are we to become a 'community of Europeans' if we share no sense of common destiny, and know little about each other beyond fancy costumes and strange customs.

2 - The changing context of language learning within the European Union

Although people in general continue to learn languages either because they have to (at school) or because they need to (for work, travel, business, living in a different place etc.), it is possible to identify within the European Community several areas in which the motivations for learning languages have altered under the pressures of European integration. Firstly, we have specific recommendations from the European Commission to encourage more language learning, both in terms of an expansion of languages learnt and of an earlier introduction of languages in schools. Secondly, it is recommended that language learning be productive in the development of both a sense of Europeanness, and a sense of national/regional identity. Thirdly, linguistic and cultural proficiency is specified as one of the underpinnings of the desired plurilingual and pluricultural community, and finally, the lack of such 'proficiency' is nominated as an obstacle to mobility in an essentially static community and therefore an obstacle to integration.

Integration, however, has also influenced language learning indirectly in important ways. By encouraging mobility as a prerequisite for both a healthy economy and strong citizenship, it highlights the need for new types of language skill: it is language for living, working and voting in different countries, rather than language for visiting that is required. It is language for meaningful participation in the society of others rather than the language for accessing cultural products.

By making plurilingualism and pluriculturalism facets of the society to be built, as opposed to selecting or creating one language for all, integration has made socio-cultural competence relevant on a broad scale. This competence includes "the affective capacity to relinquish ethnocentric attitudes towards and perceptions of otherness and a cognitive ability to

establish and maintain a relationship between native cultures and foreign cultures" (Byram, 1997; 56). It obliges us to modify the way we see others and the way we see ourselves, as well as the way we behave towards others. The teaching of a simple, clearcut language for communication with a similarly clearcut language community somewhere else is no longer justifiable; all children should grow up with the skills to enable them to interact positively across linguistic and cultural frontiers.

Broadly speaking, then, motives for learning community languages fall into two main categories. On the one hand, they serve the cause of employability within a pluricultural community; on the other, they act as an avenue through which to encourage positive attitudes towards others and to combat social ills such as exclusion, ethnocentrism and racism. In practice, neither of these requirements is met. In the first place, only lip service has been paid to the early introduction of foreign languages in schools and to the expansion of the number of languages taught and learnt. In the second, though intercultural and socio-cultural objectives abound, rigid school structures and inflexible educational cultures help keep language learning caught in the artificiality of foreignness. Languages are taught in discrete units, implying no recourse to cross-linguistic or cross-cultural strategies, while for the most part teachers and learners collude in the learning of the languages of others from the point of view of outsiders. More worryingly, the classroom in which languages are learnt runs the risk of becoming isolated from an external environment which is in fact increasingly plurilingual and pluricultural. It is clear that foreign language learning nowadays is not merely, if it ever was, just another classroom discipline. The outside world and the people in it must be allowed to impact on the classroom and on the learning.

3 - Towards the future - a cultural dimension

These trends are set to continue. The European Union (EU) will continue to need ever-increasing amounts of foreign language and culture skills as integration deepens and the Single Currency consolidates the freedoms of the internal market. The enlargement of the EU over the coming decades to include at first six and later at least another five new member states, with a corresponding increase in official Community languages and in potential cultural interaction will make the current situation untenable. What's more, the relative distance of the linguistic and cultural communities in question will aggravate matters still further.

If the language classroom is not to become increasingly alienated from this reality, it will need to face the challenges ahead which include the crucial issue of how to encourage unity while respecting diversity. While very much at the centre of this debate, language teaching as an institution is paying very little attention to it, evolving slowly in a semi-backwater of national interest while the real educational battles are being fought in the areas of first language learning and teaching, science and maths education and increasingly history. It seems that in the ever closer, ever wider community of Europe, the desire to protect national/regional languages and cultures is stronger than the will to construct a more unified community based on tolerance and respect for difference.

Yet, the language classroom could and should be the key place where the building blocks of a pluricultural and plurilingual community are constructed; after all, foreign language is "the subject *par excellence* for international cooperation in education" (Van Ek, 1977; 1). It is the place for getting to know others, developing cultural awareness and cultural tolerance. "It is in the learning of another language that the learner can be most effectively weaned away from an ethnocentric view of other peoples and cultures" (Byram, 1991; 13). It may indeed be the only place where this is possible in many cases. For this to happen, however, the classroom will have to put aside its easy assumptions about identity and problematise the question of complex and changing identities in a complex and changing world. In our increasingly mobile and familiar societies, with regular interchange of people, products and language, the emphasis must shift from simply knowing about others towards understanding them, "a move away from a way of life to a way of thinking" (Whittaker, 1995; 60).

As both language teachers and language teacher educators, we should therefore intensify our concern with the cultural dimension of our activity, and help develop its potential for crossing frontiers rather than holding them in place. A language learning environment which might promote such a cultural dimension would demonstrate the following characteristics:

- the use of communicative situations which are as close as possible to the everyday life of the target population;
- integrated language and culture teaching;
- a focus on cultural, rather than linguistic aspects;
- culturally thick and socially realistic textbook presentation;

- active engagement with the 'cultural', leading to a change in attitudes and intercultural competence which is behavioural;
- the avoidance of folklorisation, stereotypes and giving students easy formulas;
- the introduction of cross-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary activities to challenge cultural boundaries between language (and other) disciplines in schools.

As long as we continue using the language classroom as a playing field where stereotypes meet stereotypes, and the real people are elsewhere, we are not allowing it to fulfil its own potential, nor are we doing any great service to community-building in Europe or elsewhere.

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