



## Foreign language learning for European citizenship

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# Foreign language learning for European citizenship



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It is not simply the advent of 1992/93 which raises the question of how language learning relates to European citizenship. As long as language teachers have been concerned with 'broadening learners' horizons', with helping them to understand and become enthusiastic about people from other countries and cultures, they have in effect been contributing towards a general, liberal education of which 'citizenship' is a part. Socio-economic change always has an effect on education and can be traced into the detail of the classroom. The enormous changes brought by migration and immigration into Western European countries by 'guest workers' was one of the main factors which brought a new philosophy and methodology of language teaching in Britain in the 1980s. Imminent political and economic developments of the 1990s will undoubtedly have analogous effects, already becoming apparent in policy for education in general and language teaching in particular at national and European levels: the National Curriculum for foreign languages, the extension of LINGUA, the introduction of a new Council of Europe programme of 'Language learning for European citizenship'.

Young people in schools today will live in quite different political circumstances in the next few decades and will, I suspect, have quite different perceptions of themselves and their identities. The purpose of this article is to raise questions about the role language teaching in schools and colleges of *general* education can play in providing young people with a European perspective as they prepare to become members of a European society. Before discussing language teaching *per se*, however, we need to consider briefly more general issues of the interrelationships between language, schooling and identity.

## Ethnicity, language and education

The question of social and cultural identity can be profitably approached by considering the significance of ethnicity and ethnic identity. Perhaps a first reaction is to associate 'ethnicity' with minority groups – or with folklore and rural traditions. Although usage has indeed associated ethnicity with minority, I agree with Edwards (1985: 10) 'that ethnic identity is allegiance to a group – large or small, socially dominant or subordinate'. Edwards then defines ethnicity in terms of ancestral links and attachments to an observably real past, irrespective of the status or size of the social group. Although these are very important, it is crucial to recognise the fact that individuals' identities depend upon acceptance of ancestral links or even upon investment in a new identity, 'passing' from one group allegiance to another. This factor of 'self-ascription', of identifying with one's original group or a new one will be significant as national identities – by which I refer not just to nation-states but also to politically minority nations – change in a European community of the 21st century.

Let us consider first the relationship of language to identity. As Barth (1969) points out, an identity is established as much by contrasts with other identities as by features within a group's life and culture which might, at first glance, be considered intrinsic and fundamental to the identity. Thus the phenomena which mark the boundaries between groups are at least as important as the phenomena which appear to be the core of the group's identity. For in fact the relative importance of specific phenomena – ways of dressing or styles of housing and homemaking, or even shared beliefs and values for example – may change over time. The phenomena which mark contrasts and boundaries may also change but the fact of contrast and boundary remains.

Language is often a boundary marker of course but, unlike such things as dress or housing, language has a dual function. On the one hand it makes a visible and audible boundary in itself; we know we are in a different group when we see and hear a different language being used. On the other hand, language refers beyond itself to specific cultural phenomena, such as dress, food or housing, and it provides members of a group with a means of sharing and agreeing upon distinctive values and principles. Of course the relationship of language and identity is not simple, and historical events over long periods complicate matters. For example, not all people who speak German are Germans, and the Swiss have their distinctive term, *Schwyzerdutsch*, to mark the difference. Similarly not all who say they are German and have German nationality can speak German. This is evident in those groups in Central and Eastern Europe who have recently come to prominence as 'Aussiedler' (Hoffmann, 1991). They are good examples of the significance of 'self-ascription' and 'passing': it is their own determination to be 'German' which is crucial in their identity. The relationship between language and identity is thus not a necessary one and as Edwards points out when discussing minority groups (in press) 'many groups do manage a continuing solidarity after (...) language shift'. Edwards has been much criticised for this view by representatives of minority groups, for it is clear that language is seen subjectively as a crucial marker of identity.

Those whose native language is a dominant one may find the emotion attached to language defence hard to understand. This is particularly the case for speakers of English who fear no threat to their language even in a European community. It is however beginning to be the experience of others whose language hitherto was defended by political boundaries and who see their native majority language quickly becoming a minority language in the Europe of the future. The absence of threat to English is however a problem, to which I shall return later.

The view that a group must maintain its language if it is to maintain its identity and the boundaries around it, has led to well-known political confrontations and even violent actions. Sometimes such actions are focused on schooling and demands for education in the group's language (Skuttnab-Kangas and Cummins, 1988). For minority groups often put much faith in schools as a means of maintaining their language. They demand 'mother-tongue classes' and 'bilingual education' and language is clearly the visible symbol of their identity. Such faith is however often over-optimistic, as Edwards again has pointed out (1985:130). Schools alone cannot reverse a trend to language shift if other social factors are accelerating the change.

The demand for minority language education, in whatever form, hides however a more fundamental issue. Where minority schools do exist, I would argue that it is the whole process of secondary socialisation through schooling which makes such schools vital to minorities. In my work on German minority schools in Denmark (Byram, 1986) I found that the use of German as the language of instruction was only part of their significance for the minority. Because it is a minority where the language is not used communicatively by all its members, it becomes clear that membership of the minority, though it may be initiated by ancestral ties, by being born into a minority family, is confirmed and reinforced by attendance at a German school. Put simplistically, one is a member of the German minority because one attended a German school, and a German school is not German simply because of the language but rather because of the philosophy and ethos which characterises it. By attending a German school, children are socialised into the values and the culture which are distinctive of the minority.

## Foreign language learning and National Identity

This discussion of ethnicity and identity is significant for foreign language teaching in two ways. First, it underlines the potency of ethnic identity as a political force and as a concept for clarifying what we mean by social and cultural identity. For it is clear that ethnic identity and national identity are closely related (Edwards, 1985). It reminds us – and we hardly need it in view of events in the former Soviet block – that national identity is not the same as state identity. The second reason is that it gives us a different point from which to consider language and schooling in monolingual majority groups – and here I shall be dealing primarily with the situation in England, and with due modifications with the United Kingdom as a whole.

I have argued then that minority groups are quite right to demand their own schools as a means of maintaining group identity. Children enter schools having already internalised some general social roles – for example gender roles – and while they are of an age for compulsory schooling they enter into the process of secondary socialisation. This is when they take on specific social roles and values peculiar to a given society. Or, more precisely, they are expected to do so and to acquiesce tacitly to the values and roles decided for them by dominant social groups. In other words they begin to become 'English' by attending a 'state' school with a 'national' curriculum. Their ethnic identity is imposed or reinforced by the English school. For some, it is indeed imposed, as their identity before starting school may in fact have been different.

This function of schooling has become particularly explicit in the current decade in England, as control over the curriculum – and over the culture and identity it embodies – has been shifted to the centre, much as it has been in other states for many years. The haste with which the British government has sought to catch up is in part a consequence of the perceived threat to nationhood implicit in the development of a supernational or, at the very least, an international European community. Simultaneously it serves to reduce the threat from within, from the heterogeneity of identities of immigrant minorities. The school curriculum presents a culture which maintains ancestral links. By insisting that *national* history and literature should be taught, a national government seeks to create a homogeneous national ethnicity.

Language plays a special part. As minorities recognise, it is a powerful symbol for the majority too. It embodies the values of the majority – which may not be a numerical majority but a majority in terms of political power. Insistence that the language of schooling and secondary socialisation should be 'standard' English, ensures that 'standard' cultural values are transmitted. Children learn in the language which sustains the nation-state. Failure to do so is accompanied by academic failure and the latter ensures that individuals with other than 'standard' cultural values do not easily reach positions of power and influence. The longevity of the nation-state and the creation of a national ethnicity are in part dependent on the imposition of a standard language.

National governments have seldom sought to hide their motives. The thread is visible from the revolutionary government of post-1789 France, which suppressed any attempts to revive regional languages, through François Mitterrand's refusal to support Breton, to Kenneth Baker's declaration that the English language is 'the essential ingredient of the Englishness of England' (cited in Jones and Kimberley, 1991:17). Similarly the Swann Report disappointed many by not advocating bilingual education for bilingual children. This was already anticipated in the preface where the 'common language' is given equal standing with a common political and legal system as the means to give a society 'a degree of unity and its members a form of "corporate membership"'. (1985:4).

In this situation the position of foreign languages in the curriculum is anomalous. They are the – potentially insidious – *international* abnormality in a 'national' curriculum. Until recently they could be treated as marginal, posing no threat to national identity. Now, however, political pressure from the rest of the European Community to have one – and preferably two – foreign languages in the curriculum for *all* pupils, together with

economic needs to find non-English speaking markets, has led to foreign languages acquiring the status of a foundation subject. This would still be insignificant in terms of national identity if languages continued to be taught as they are now, for purposes of economic growth and for promoting 'tolerance' of those who are not English. For it has become the custom to teach foreign languages in secondary schools as if pupils were to become tourists and holidaymakers in the foreign country. They have the language needed for 'survival' in such situations and are given some 'useful' but rather superficial information about the country in question. This however has no effect on their view of their own identity and that of others; they are implicitly invited to remain firmly anchored in their own values and culture. Thus it is scarcely surprising that the effect of language teaching on their perceptions of and attitudes towards other peoples is minimal (Byram, Esarte-Sarries and Taylor, 1991).

There is however a basis in the proposals for the National Curriculum for an alternative approach. We must remember that a foreign language for us is a native language for someone else. It embodies their cultural values and marks their ethnic identity. It offers therefore an alternative view and another means of experiencing the world. To acquire that language and alternative view requires a significant jump from one world-view to another. At the simplest level it involves for example a different way of 'telling' – i.e. conceptualising – the time; compare German 'dreiviertel vier' and English 'quarter to four'. At a more advanced stage, it involves a cognitive and affective understanding of the historical and contemporary resonance of political terms e.g. 'die Wende' (for the events in East Germany leading to reunification) which has no equivalent in English. If young people are led, through learning a foreign language, to integration into their own concepts and value system of the value system and concepts of another mode of thinking and acting – another culture – they can be said to move into what I call 'tertiary socialisation', (Byram, 1990; Doyé, 1992).

Tertiary socialisation is not merely the acquisition of tolerance of difference and otherness. It requires a modification of learners' existing modes of thinking and acting. This is not to say that it requires unthinking acceptance of other values or identification with them. For, by methods of comparison and contrast, it involves a critical review of both sets of values and modes of thought. It is significant that such an approach is essentially political, because it challenges and relativises the taken-for-granted naturalness of known systems of thought and values. It takes learners beyond the concept of national identity and national culture and opens a perspective which is dependent on neither native nor foreign culture. This is not to say that we should attempt to create a sense of anomie, of belonging nowhere, in language learners. Nor is it to say that the power of primary and secondary socialisation is going to be undermined by a few hours of foreign language learning. What is desirable, however, is that the 'naturalness' of values and concepts acquired in one culture and internalised as a national identity should be relativised and brought under critical scrutiny. Our way of 'telling the time' is not the only way; our way of thinking about 'democracy' has to be compared with the meaning an apparently similar word carries in another country and culture.

What I am proposing here is in one sense not new. Professions of the aims of foreign language teaching in many countries contain reference to promotion of tolerance, positive attitudes and insight into other cultures. The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe formulated the issues in 1982, recommending that all sections of the population should have the linguistic knowledge and skills:

- 'to deal with the business of everyday life in another country, and to help foreigners staying in their own country to do so;
- to exchange information and ideas with young people and adults who speak a different language and to communicate their thoughts and feelings to them;
- to achieve a wider and deeper understanding of the way of life and forms of thought of other peoples and of their cultural heritage.'

(Recommendation No. R(82)18).

Another example can be taken from the statement of the aims of teaching German as a foreign language in France:

'L'objectif de l'enseignement de l'allemand est culturel, éducatif et linguistique (....)

L'objectif éducatif est étroitement lié à l'objectif culturel. La découverte de quelques œuvres représentatives de la culture allemande permet d'éveiller la curiosité intellectuelle des élèves et d'affiner leur sensibilité.

Le constat par les élèves de la diversité des civilisations et des comportements qui s'y attachent leur permet d'accepter plus facilement les différences dans un esprit pluraliste'.

(Ministère de l'Education Nationale, 1985: 95).

In proposals for our National Curriculum there is an important addition to the focus on understanding of foreign people and cultures. It is stated that one of the aims of foreign language teaching should be 'to develop pupils' understanding of themselves and their own culture' (DES, 1990: 3). This is important, because it is only through a knowledge of both self and other that full communication can be successful. I need to know how others see me as well as how I see others, if we are to communicate *with* each other and not just communicate messages *to* each other.

Yet current teaching practice is focused almost exclusively on promoting skills in communicating messages in the foreign language. Although this is clearly not incompatible with tertiary socialisation, the widely-held assumption that teachers should concentrate on communication skills and that 'tolerance' and 'insight' into the foreign culture will emerge, is not justified. Clearly, learners' exposure to a foreign language – especially when it is presented in contexts from a foreign country – will lead to increased awareness of other people and their modes of thinking and acting. It does not appear, however, – as our research has shown (Byram, Esarte-Sarries and Taylor, 1991) – to lead to cognitive change, to modification of existing concepts, or to affective change and the modification of existing values and attitudes. 'Awareness' is not 'understanding'. It is not enough to know that there are other ways of seeing and experiencing the world, that there are other cultural identities. Learners need to know and experience that, from other people's point of view, *they* are the 'foreigners', *their* mode of thinking and acting seems unnatural. This is a far more significant purpose for language teaching than simply learning to, 'get-by' when on holiday or use the foreign language in a sales-pitch.

It is also far more difficult, but I am not pessimistic. The National Curriculum lays the foundation. Teaching methods are being developed, in research projects at the University of Durham and the Polytechnic of West London. Briefly, the methodology takes its starting point in ethnography, the study of another culture. We are attempting to adapt the techniques and purposes of fieldwork to the foreign language classroom. Initially this means working with intermediate and advanced learners in upper secondary and higher education. It means using the insights from ethnography and anthropology to decide which culture domains shall be studied and how to gather and

analyse data from the culture. It also means that learners study their own culture in order to practise the data-gathering techniques and in order to acquire a more conscious understanding of the relationship of their own and the foreign culture. The next phase will be to develop appropriate methods to classes for beginners in lower secondary schooling.

This work is experimental and we must await outcomes and evaluation. We hope to show that, through *language and culture* teaching, young people will acquire a means of reflecting on themselves, their culture and their identity in a way which will allow them to transcend the constraints of national identity in its present form. This does not mean falling into some amorphous European identity, the fear which some people use to justify the maintenance of the nation-state and national identity with all the dangers and injustices they embody. It means that learners recognise that the values, structures and meanings of their own society are social conventions not natural laws or institutions. They recognise that there are alternatives, that they can question and change what might have appeared unchanging and unchangeable, that they can *choose* their own identity and, finally, that if anything is 'natural' it is the diversity of identities to which they have access through foreign language learning.

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