



## Foreign language education as political and moral education — an essay

Michael Byram

**To cite this article:** Michael Byram (2002) Foreign language education as political and moral education — an essay, *Language Learning Journal*, 26:1, 43-47, DOI: [10.1080/09571730285200221](https://doi.org/10.1080/09571730285200221)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/09571730285200221>



Published online: 06 Aug 2007.



Submit your article to this journal 



Article views: 776



View related articles 



Citing articles: 3 [View citing articles](#) 

# Foreign language education as political and moral education – an essay

Michael Byram

University of Durham

By preferring "foreign language education" to "foreign language teaching" in my title, I want to emphasise the importance of language learning as part of general education in any education system. In Britain in particular, where the usefulness of learning a specific foreign language is often questioned, the significance of the educational purposes of language teaching/learning needs to be recognised, not least by teachers. For, although parents and politicians may focus on the utility of language learning and the belief that early language learning will produce the best results in terms of proficiency, teachers responsible for the education of young people – and for the constant debate about what education should be as circumstances in the world change – should engage with educational issues as part of their work. It is thus encouraging and important that a debate has recently begun in the *Language Learning Journal* (Pachler, 2000; Williams, 2001), and though not written as a direct response to that debate, this article may be seen as a contribution.

## PURPOSES OF FL EDUCATION

It is all too evident, of course, that foreign language education has changed almost out of recognition in the last few decades. Often this change is seen in terms of methods and materials, but it is more important to consider purposes and functions, and to review where we have reached and what the next decade might bring.

From a position some decades ago when learning a language, modern or ancient, led to a study of high culture, we moved in the last two or three decades of the twentieth century to the view that the purpose was to communicate. For both purposes, the focus and direction of attention was almost exclusively the native speakers of the language in question – whether as producers of high culture or as people offering everyday services to tourists or as potential friends and acquaintances. In both cases, whatever the differences in teaching methods, it was the usefulness of the language which was its prime justification, although the earlier model was intended to serve the liberal education purposes that had been developed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In the midst of the change to communicative aims, there were attempts to retrieve some of the

educational aspects that were lost with the shift of focus from the study of high culture. The first attempt was labelled 'language awareness', which included both the illumination of the nature of language and critical reflection on its significance for learners as 'language people'. Language awareness work also served as an apprenticeship in more effective language learning, and for many the latter was its principal purpose, although personally I stressed the former. The second attempt was the evolution of 'cultural awareness' from 'background studies', in order to realise some of the other aims of language teaching listed in National Curriculum and other documents, namely the development of positive attitudes towards others and a better understanding of other cultures and one's own.

Behind these various developments, whether utility orientated or critically reflective and educational, there was an implicit view of a monolingual learner in a homogeneous society focused on a similar homogeneous society of native speakers. Both societies were nation-states, whose actual heterogeneous nature was not part of the image promoted within foreign language education until after the point when most learners had given up their language learning. It is not an over-simplification to say that often young people learn the 'French' of a nation called 'the French' and that it is only after the age of compulsory education that the few young people still studying French begin to understand the complexity of language, people and nation-state. In other languages, the recognition that Spanish or German is spoken in countries other than Spain or Germany is of more significance but scarcely changes the underlying bilateral orientation of the British learner in Britain acquiring the language and learning about the people of a single political entity of comparable significance, i.e. another nation-state. This reflected, and to some extent still reflects, the political context in which education

"nation-states, whose actual heterogeneous nature was not part of the image promoted within foreign language education"

takes place, the school as an institution which is an embodiment of national values, national perspectives and a national culture. It also reflected the macro-political situation where states were independent and interacted and negotiated with each other on a bilateral basis, Britain with France, France with Germany etc.

## EUROPE AND CITIZENSHIP

That macro-political situation is rapidly changing, as the European Union increasingly acquires a status and character which deeply affects the ways in which people and states interact and communicate with each other. There are obvious indicators, such as the Euro, and there are less evident but just as significant factors such as rules and regulations in many aspects of public life being determined in Brussels. The EU is acquiring some of the characteristics of the nation-state. This is not to say that Europe is or will ever be a homogeneous entity, any more than the current nation-states are, but it does mean that increasingly people see themselves as, say, French Europeans or German Europeans or Spanish Europeans, to mention only those whose languages are widely taught in Britain. Furthermore, all citizens of EU countries are also EU citizens, with voting, residential and other rights and obligations.

What does this new situation mean for education in general and foreign language education in particular? How are current and future citizens to be educated?

“Education for citizenship” is being introduced into the English National Curriculum and education system. It reflects the tension between national and European governments in that it is focused almost exclusively on ‘community’ at or below national level; in the Crick Report (*Education for citizenship and the teaching of democracy in schools*, 1998), the origin of the curriculum subject, only lip-service is paid to a European community. There is no competing curriculum for European citizenship which might promote not only a national but also a European identity, but this is where language education is allocated a role in EU educational thinking.

In 1995, the European Commission published the White Paper on ‘The Learning Society’ which defines the EU position on aspects of education, including language education. Here, language learning is linked to three issues – first, economic opportunity:

proficiency in several Community (i.e. EU) languages has become a precondition if citizens of the European Union are to benefit from the occupational and personal opportunities open to them in the border-free single market. This language proficiency must be backed up by the ability to adapt to working and living environments characterised by different cultures.

Second, a sense of belonging and identity:

languages are also 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.

Third, educational progress for the individual:

learning languages also has another important effect: experience shows that when undertaken from a very early age, it is an important factor in doing well at school. Contact with another language is not only compatible with becoming proficient in one’s mother tongue, it also makes it easier.

All this is then summed up by linking identity, citizenship and learning:

multilingualism is part and parcel of both European identity/citizenship and the learning society.

(European Commission, 1995: 67)

Here the notion of proficiency in languages is linked to, and is implicitly seen as being in a causal relationship with, a sense of being European, with European identity, which in turn seems to be synonymous with citizenship. Now of course the above is not an academic text and it would be unfair to criticise the assertions for lack of evidence. Two assertions could nonetheless be investigated empirically: that language learning creates a sense of being European and that learning other languages improves proficiency in the mother tongue. The latter relationship has been shown to exist in immersion programmes in Canada (Swain and Lapkin, 1982) but is it the case with forms of language teaching and learning where the language is a subject rather than a medium of instruction? As for the former, there is as yet no evidence but policy is sometimes a statement of aspiration and rightly so (*pace* those who argue that all policy should be ‘evidence-based’).

This suggests therefore that language teachers are expected to play an important role in the creation of a European identity and citizenry. It opens the options of co-operation with those who are responsible for education for citizenship, a co-operation which would ensure an international dimension to citizenship, at least to the level of Europe. A further step of taking a truly international perspective beyond Europe is not reflected in the thinking so far.

The expectation of language teaching/learning in the European Commission White Paper is not worked through in detail. The implication is that language teaching and learning as currently practised need merely to be extended so as to ensure a minimal number of languages are learnt by young people in order for the policy aims to be attained. Yet there are deeper implications as

“the notion of proficiency in languages is linked to...a sense of being European”

language teachers become part of this political and social process, implications which could, perhaps should, change the nature of language teaching so that it becomes political and moral education.

## POLITICAL EDUCATION

Let me first of all explain what I mean by 'political education', a phrase which may have negative connotations which need to be countered. Here is a quotation from John Dewey, who argues that education can be conservative, i.e. it preserves a society as it is, or it can be progressive, i.e. it promotes change for the better in a society:

a society which not only changes but which has the ideal of such change as will improve it, will have different standards and methods of education from one which aims simply at the perpetuation of its own customs.

I think in the 21st century it is clear that perpetuation and preservation are no longer an option. All societies are changing, not least Europe, and the question is whether they have an ideal towards which they want to change or whether they are just drifting with no direction. Dewey's ideal was that societies should change towards a situation where all individuals and groups interact with each other in full and free expression, sharing some common values even if they maintain some values and ideas which are specific to them. He says that what militates against such an ideal are those situations where

one group has interests "of its own" which shut it out from full interaction with other groups, so that its prevailing purpose is the protection of what it has got, instead of reorganisation and progress through wider relationships.

And he goes on to give examples:

it marks nations in their isolation from one another; families which seclude their domestic concerns as if they had no connection with a larger life; schools when separated from the interest of home and community; the divisions of rich and poor, learned and unlearned.

(1916/1985: 87)

The first of these examples is particularly relevant to us as language teachers since national isolation can be maintained by not allowing language learning and, conversely, language learning is a necessary condition for interaction across national boundaries. And, furthermore, the nation-state with a 'national' curriculum, is still a powerful force for conservation and isolation even in the 21st century.

So what I mean by politics in education is the role education, including language education, plays in changing societies for the better. Of

course what we mean by 'better' is a question for debate but Dewey's proposal is that democracy is the best means of developing towards societies in which every individual and every group interacts and plays a full role with shared values. This seems to be echoed in the declaration of Heads of State and Governments of Member states of the Council of Europe in 1997 who put 'education for democratic citizenship' as one of their main priorities for the next decade.

Thus, my argument is that we should develop the potential for political education which exists in language teaching, preferably in cooperation with teachers of other subjects. I do not want to suggest, however, that language teachers are unaware of their political education role, even if they might not use the term itself. Here, for example, is a teacher of German who ensures that her learners take note of events in another part of Europe:

I often say to my classes, you know, 'Were you watching the news last night?' At the beginning or at the end of a lesson maybe when we're rounding off. 'Did you think of me last night, when you were watching the news?' Because it was something that happened, you know, the problems they're having in Germany at the moment, or whatever. Because I want them to think that it's not just something they do in my classroom two or three times a week and that's it. There are people who speak that language and there are problems that those people have and they should be aware of that.

(Byram and Risager, 1999: 103)

Nevertheless, Mrs H is still a German teacher talking about Germany; she may not yet feel a responsibility for creating awareness among her learners of Europe as a whole. She is still in a bilateral mode of thinking.

## MORAL EDUCATION

The new macro-situation requires a different mode where the usefulness of language teaching will be evident in the preparation of young people to live in the multilingual and multicultural democratic polity of the expanding European Union. 'Usefulness' in this new situation will not be the preparation for the study of high culture, nor the ability to converse with native speakers – even though these purposes should not be abandoned – for in the new situation the usefulness of learning a particular language will be in the opportunities it also offers for political education. Furthermore, political education will be infused with moral education, bringing new demands of 'language' teachers in their responsibilities as educators.

Teachers like Mrs H are already engaged in this, as they introduce young people to other ways of living, other assumptions about what is 'normal',

**"language learning is a necessary condition for interaction across national boundaries."**

and thereby challenge and criticise learners' own sense of what is 'normal'. This ranges from the organisation of the school day – quite different in Germany and England – to beliefs, values and behaviours of a fundamental kind, such as family relationships, political institutions, perceptions of social problems, and ultimately a questioning of one's own national identity. For if 'the other' way of living and being is compared with 'ours' – as indeed the English National Curriculum suggests – then we as learners, whatever our age, begin to question what we have hitherto taken for granted. This means that our teacher, who has placed us in this questioning position by careful planning of her lessons, is pushing us into new stages of moral judgement, and thereby takes on herself an ethical responsibility to ensure that whatever conclusions we draw are not biased by her way of presenting alternatives.

For, if Mrs H were to say that everything in German schools is better than in England, that there are no problems for young people, that the education system is obviously more successful, then she would be tending to indoctrinate rather than educate. I am sure that she does not; her purpose is not to say one is better than the other, but rather to encourage her learners to see their own education from a different perspective. Furthermore, Mrs H does not make this the central part of her teaching and probably does not plan her lessons on the basis of political and moral educational objectives.

Other teachers are, however, beginning to do this, even if they would not use the same terminology, and we have collected their accounts of their work (Byram, Nichols and Stevens, 2001). With relatively young learners at an early stage in language acquisition, Carol Morgan, teaching French in England and English in France, experiments with ideas of 'law and order' and finds her pupils beginning to question institutions in their own country as a consequence of having to describe them to pupils in another country. With older learners, Krassimira Tupozova, teaching English in Bulgaria, takes the simple idea of an investigation of the function and types of Christmas cards in Bulgaria and England, and ends in a discussion with her learners about concepts of charity, poverty and state responsibilities in pre- and post-communist Bulgaria. In the course of this she draws upon everyday artifacts, old Christmas cards from Britain, and products of high culture, such as Dickens' *Christmas Carol*. In her lessons the political and moral issues are very clear, and made all the more evident in the bilateral comparison of Britain and Bulgaria. Yet this is more than a comparison of two countries; it ends as a discussion of morality in capitalism and communism, and as a preparation for the new European macro-situation in which these young people are living.

Like Mrs H, both Carol Morgan and Krassimira Tupozova have to be aware of their

responsibilities, of the risk of education becoming indoctrination. However, although it is a new consideration for language teachers, it is familiar ground for teachers of other subjects, particularly in the humanities, and if we compare with other education systems – practising an intercultural approach for ourselves – the relationship of political education to foreign language education becomes clearer.

Doyé (1993) draws parallels between foreign language education and 'politische Bildung' as understood in the German tradition of schooling. He bases his analysis on Gagel's (1983) distinction between three kinds of 'orientation' to be offered across all subjects to young people during their general education:

- cognitive orientation: the acquisition of concepts, knowledge and modes of analysis for the understanding of political phenomena
- evaluative orientation: the explanation and mediation of values and the ability to make political judgements on the basis of these values
- action orientation: development of the ability and the readiness for political engagement.

In the FL classroom, Doyé argues, there is congruence between these dimensions of political education and the aims and methods of FLT:

- cognitive orientation: the international dimension of the acquisition of knowledge about and understanding of other countries, cultures and societies
- evaluative orientation: political education shall lead learners to reflection on social norms, including those of other societies than their own, in order to lead them to a capacity for political judgement; this corresponds to the aims of FLT to lead learners to respect the norms of other societies and to evaluate them in an unprejudiced way
- action orientation: both political education and FLT aim to instil in learners a disposition for engagement and interaction with others; in the case of FLT the 'others' are usually from another culture and society and the interaction is, psychologically if not sociologically, of a different kind, but is an extension of engagement with people in one's own society.

Doyé is drawing here on a general discussion of the nature of education which in Britain would probably be called "philosophy of education" whereas in Germany it is simply 'education', and important for all teachers in their education. By making connections in this way, Doyé ensures the place of foreign language teaching in education for all, whereas language teaching in Britain has

always had the status of an élitist subject, and this has not been much reduced by the emphasis on communication and the generalisation to all pupils. It is still a marginal subject as can be seen by the readiness with which ministers reduce the obligation to learn or the frequency with which headteachers disapply National Curriculum requirements. My argument here is that a recognition of the political and moral dimensions can and should be the opportunity for greater integration with the rest of the curriculum.

The best opportunity is surely within the language colleges. A new conception of languages in the curriculum could and should go beyond an increase in the number of languages taught and learnt, or the use of foreign languages as media of instruction, for example. This kind of approach is in keeping with the recommendations of the EU White Paper, but has the same limitations of assuming that simply adding more languages to the repertoire of individuals will suffice. Language colleges have the potential to become international institutions in the fullest sense, engaging pupils and teachers with comparative critical perspectives which challenge assumptions they hold about all aspects of education and their daily lives. This is not just another name for multicultural education and must not be allowed to slide into the tokenism often associated with it. Whereas multicultural education is an attempt to recognise diversity within a society and state, international and foreign language education is a break with the focus on our own society in order to find new perspectives which allow us to be critical of our assumptions. By its very nature this is at odds with 'national' education and a National Curriculum fashioned to reinforce national culture and identity. And this brings us back to the macro-political context in which foreign language education in Britain exists; language colleges could be the location for our education to become international and respond to the changes in the contemporary world.

That all education is imbued with social, political and moral values ought to be self-evident, even though contemporary terminology of 'skills'

and 'competences' tries to hide this. That foreign language education is part of this, again despite the constant reference to 'skills' in the professional rhetoric and discourse, is something the language teaching profession should recognise and debate more frequently. The implications for classroom activities and for teacher education – and the need to challenge the emphasis on the training of competences – are what I hope to have made clear. If language teaching/education is to have significance in our schools, these questions must be debated.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This essay has been influenced by my reading and discussions with many people but I would particularly like to thank two: Geneviève Zarate and Jean-Claude Beacco.

I am also grateful to Norbert Pachler, as co-editor of the *Language Learning Journal*, for suggestions to improve the text, but I remain responsible for the content.

## REFERENCES

Byram, M. and Risager, K. (1999) *Language Teachers, Politics and Cultures*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Byram, M., Nichols, A. and Stevens, D. (2001) *Developing Intercultural Competence in Action*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Dewey, J. (1916) *Democracy and Education*. New York: Macmillan.

Doyé, P. (1993) Neuere Konzepte der Fremdsprachenerziehung und ihre Bedeutung für die Schulbuchkritik. In Byram, M. (ed.) *Germany: Its representation in textbooks for teaching German in Great Britain*. Frankfurt a. M.: Diesterweg

*Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools*. (The Crick Report) (1998) London: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

European Commission (1995) *Teaching and Learning: Towards the learning society*. Brussels: European Commission.

Pachler, N. (2000) 'Review article' *Language Learning Journal* winter, 22, 70-4

Swain, M. and Lapkin, S. (1982) *Evaluating Bilingual Education: A Canadian case study*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Williams, K. (2001) 'Towards a rationale for foreign language education: re-stating my reservations.' *Language Learning Journal* winter, 24, 43-7

**"A new conception of languages in the curriculum could and should go beyond an increase in the number of languages taught and learnt"**