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Daniela CĂTĂU VEREȘ

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PLURILINGUALISM AND CULTURAL OPENNESS IN THE STUDY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES AT EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY LEVEL

Daniela CATAU-VERES¹

Abstract

EU language policy promotes and supports multilingualism, and implicitly the plurilingualism, as fundamental principles to foster interpersonal communication and cultural openness between European citizens, eliminating the idea of a single and dominant communication language. The European Council from Barcelona established the European goal of language policy in March 2002, aiming at improving the basic language skills of European citizens, by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age. In this respect, the European non-linguistic higher education, and thus the Romanian, must meet the challenges of the EU linguistic policy, through innovative educational programs that encourage multilingualism among students, university teachers and researchers. As evidenced by some best practice examples of some universities in France and Britain, this major European objective contribute to improve the image of the internationalization of universities and scientific media attracting foreign students from different parts of the world.

Keywords:

European language policy, multilingualism, plurilingualism, foreign languages, university, innovative programs, students, best practices, language skills, cultural openness.

¹ PhD, "Ștefan cel Mare" University of Suceava, Faculty of Law and Administrative Sciences

1. Current European linguistic context

Regarded as the ability to use several languages by the same individual, multilingualism is one of the objectives of EU language policy [1], it can be found in the fundamental principle of multilingualism and cultural diversity, supported by the Maastricht Treaty, the Amsterdam Treaty (1999 - Art. 21 EC) and the Charter of Fundamental Rights (Art. 21-1-Non-discrimination). Linguistic heritage of each Member State, as well as cultural diversity constitute the core values promoted by the European linguistic policy.

On March 31, 1995, the EU Council adopted a resolution by which students in the Member States should be able to learn two EU languages, other than their mother tongue. In this regard, statistics show that European university education provides the learning frame of a second language, but in different proportions, depending on the country, English being predominantly, followed by French and German. In terms of the European institutions, officers and senior officials use the same two main communication languages: English and French. The communication between European citizens and the European institutions is made mostly in the two languages, to the disadvantage of those who speak only their native language. If French is present today more in diplomatic and legal context within the European institutions, it lost ground to English that has been imposed at all levels of communication in areas such as social, politics, culture and education (here is about, in special, the University and Research Education).

Therefore, what will be the linguistic future of the EU? To what extent the exclusive knowledge of English is an advantage or a handicap? In the age of multimedia, information, Internet, free travel and various exchanges between European countries, why should we close or restrict our access to communication by limiting the study to a single dominant language? What measures should be taken to redirect the interest of European citizens to the neighbours' culture and language? At what age should take place the contact with the language of at least two European countries? By what methods? In addition, especially, what European universities can do in order to become more visible and to be an important factor to favour the linguistic and cultural openness among European citizens?

2. The European Observatory on plurilingualism

Pleading in favour of plurilingualism, a fundamental right under the European Charter of Plurilingualism

On 24 and 25 of November 2005, in Paris, was held the first meeting of Assises européennes du plurilinguisme, when was founded the European Observatory on plurilingualism. On the same occasion, was written the European Charter of Plurilingualism, which states as universal status of knowledge of at least two foreign languages in addition to their mother tongue. In the preamble of the Charter says that „a plurilingual society is composed in majority of individuals able to express themselves at different levels of competence in several languages, namely from multilingual or plurilingual individuals, while a multilingual society can be composed in majority of monolingual individuals who do not speak each other's language” [1]. So plurilingualism in Europe would be the most appropriate and efficient form of communication, whether in the space of public debate, because it has as values the tolerance and acceptance of differences and minorities, but also in education and scientific space, as it opens access to information and scientific communication. Regarded as a fundamental component of European identity in the dominant context of globalization, multilingualism militates against the monopoly of a single language of communication.

3. Advantages of plurilingualism in Europe

The values, virtues and advantages of plurilingualism in Europe are clearly defined in his European charter. Among these values, knowledge and recognition of others ranks first because „language diversity ensures the plurality and richness of representations”. The existence of a single language of international communication is not the most effective way of mutual understanding between European citizens, nor the perennial national identities. A second value multilingualism is freedom, because the world can be known only through language, and knowledge of one or more foreign languages increases the vision of the human horizon, and on contemporary society. Plurilingualism is also a fundamental source of the sense of European citizenship and belonging to a diverse culture. Meanwhile, as spokesperson of intercultural values as an opening to the other, multilingualism can be a guarantee of dialogue and peace. Another essential aspect of multilingualism is its ability to lead people towards economic progress. By knowing at least two foreign languages, is ensured the personal development and communication skills favourable to social and economic

success of European citizens through a better integration in the labour market. However, more than that, it supports the scientific progress. In this regard, the European Charter for Multilingualism proposes promoting the multilingual scientific publishing and promoting parallel scientific texts produced in the mother tongue as the diversity of scientific approaches in their own language is a source of wealth that cannot be achieved through a single language of international communication.

4. Examples of good practices and innovative programs in the field of plurilingualism in European higher education: the case of France and UK

On March 14, 2013, President of the European Observatory of Plurilingualism signed a letter to the minister of higher education and research in France, Ms. Geneviève Fioraso, where specified several proposals for amendment of a bill that would pave the course to some university programs with exclusive English teaching in French universities. This reaction aims to fight against English universalization as the sole mean of university communication, and against monolingualism risks in a world embarked on the slope diversity and intercultural exchanges. These risks have been formulated as: sources of knowledge are exclusively external sources; challenging the diversity; breaking traditions; research directions would become external, and creativity should be fenced.

The same document notes that promoters of English universalization, as language of communication is a scientific proof of humanity's profound ignorance of social trends and political leading to a multipolar and multilingual world. In addition, it mentions the need to create realistic international university networks, allowing students to learn a third language, besides the two that should already enter in the university system. This is just an example of linguistic policy response in Europe, confirming increased efforts to promote multilingualism in academia.

The situation is even more interesting, as even native speakers now consider English as an insufficient means of communication. Statistics show that English is the language with the greatest frequency in teaching in almost all European countries. [3]. According to the study „Les Européens et leurs langues” [2: 11]. English is by far the most commonly used language in the EU, more than half of respondents (51%) speak English as natives or as a foreign language. In 2009-2010, 73% of EU primary school students learned English and in secondary education, this percentage exceeds 90%. The following two languages with frequency in teaching are German (32%) and French (26%), followed by Spanish (15%).

However, according to Eurobarometer surveys, conducted in 2012, the language skills of Europeans remain poor. Thus, only 30% of Brits declared themselves capable to participate in a conversation in a foreign language [3]. In the same situation are Portugal (39%), Ireland (40%) and Italy (38%). If only 14% of French people speak English, 9% of English speak French.

These facts concerning the communication skills of Europeans have been the subject of many studies and researches, especially in countries such as England and France, who reassessed their language policies at university level. So, the British apparently advantaged by the use of English as the priority language of scientific communication, are recognized in a serious linguistic deficit that is expressed by the relative inability of the population to speak foreign languages. [4: 81-94]. British governments have sought effective means to fix this situation, by encouraging and supporting universities in implementing an innovative program, Routes into languages, creating an active community to fight against monolingualism. This program is based on the solidarity of three levels of education: university, secondary and general education. In fact, it aims to stimulate foreign language learning in higher education by acting in partnership with the general secondary school, where already has to begin the teaching-learning process of a wide range of languages. Sent as ambassadors of foreign languages, students participate in various activities in schools and colleges (such as adopt-a-class) in order to motivate students to study foreign languages and to continue this at an academic level. Colloquia, various competitions aim at promoting multilingualism in contributing to young population.

Partner of a language policy that promotes multilingualism, British academia took measures to correct the language deficit due to monolingualism, in order to enable students to have access to new markets and opportunities in a globalized world, through cultural openness offered by the study of other languages.

A similar example of university openness for multilingualism offers the University of Strasbourg. Relying on instruments produced by the Council of Europe like the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the European Language Portfolio, Strasbourg academia proposed a pedagogical innovation in order to support and to value the diversification of language skills of students, creating a device called Centres des Ressources de Langues [5: 17-23]. In fact, it is a reconstruction model of the European university area, fixed and limited to a single scientific communication language, namely English. This device brings together more language learning centres, offering to students the opportunity to study at

least 2 or 3, autonomously, chosen languages, under the supervision of trainers. The principles of this device can be transferred to any other discipline. The fundamental objective of the program was that „any graduate student at the University of Strasbourg to become trilingual.” [5: 22]. Having the confidence of the management team of the university, CRL managed in a few years to achieve the operational objectives of the program that was based on openness to multilingualism. These objectives are: empowering students in the training process by learning autonomy under the supervision of teacher and self-control; internationalization of bibliographic resources; openness to international internships and mobility; openness to a professional insertion of their students abroad etc.

The CRL experience began with 20 places at the Faculty of Life Sciences, to reach in 10 years the creation of seven other CRL within University campus, serving currently around 14,000 students per year. The investment in purchasing the teaching materials, computers and in training of foreign language teachers gave expected results in terms of autonomy in learning, thus valuing the individual and his autonomy. In this regard, CRL shares are registered in the EU language policy, promoting learning throughout life, labour flexibility, mobility and multilin [6] gualism among students from technical faculties and scientific orientation, which do not specialize in foreign languages.

Conclusions

In view of multilingualism, knowledge of several languages at varying degrees of competence, in the context of an open world, is a freedom and a necessity of the current European space in general and academics in particular. In this regard, are proposed several solutions, which converge towards a change in mentality in terms of study of foreign languages and multilingualism as a means of communication and intercultural acceptance. In fact, the fundamental mutation must occur in education, beginning with early age and develop independent learning skills necessary to learn new languages throughout life of the individual. Here, trainers in scientific disciplines, which should promote linguistic and cultural exchanges, participating in international mobility and being able to teach scientific subjects in two languages other than the mother tongue, must give the best example. In higher education, the generalization of teaching two foreign languages to all non-linguistic courses or teaching some scientific disciplines in at least two languages, besides their mother tongue, would greatly enhance the attraction of foreign Erasmus students or researchers from other countries, in universities less visible in the international sphere. This would not only be a huge gain in terms of image and scientific performance.

Developing a genuine culture of self-training and self-multilingual evaluation would therefore be the stake of each European country and every European universities, interested in progress, democracy, scientific performance, tolerance and cultural openness.

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