

## Foreign Language Teaching Policy

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### Defining Foreign Languages

As used here, the term ‘foreign language teaching’ refers to two phenomena: (a) the provision in one country of instruction in a language whose home base is another country, and (b) instruction in a transnational language such as English or Arabic whose identification with a particular country is minimal. Policies with respect to both of these phenomena will be referred to as foreign language policies. In most countries, the second type of foreign language is becoming more important than the first in foreign language teaching policy.

It is also important to note that in many countries the division between domestic and foreign languages is imprecise. In Canada, French is a regional language, serving as the official language of Quebec, and it is the first non-mother-tongue language taught to children in the non-Francophone portions of Canada, and it is also taught as a foreign language. Tamil is both a domestic and a foreign language in Sri Lanka. Turkish and Arabic are both foreign and immigrant languages in many of the cities of Europe. Spanish was at first an immigrant language in the United States. It has become a strong regional language in California, Florida, and the American southwest, and it is the foreign language with the largest enrollment in schools and colleges throughout the United States. Modern Standard Arabic is taught in countries in the Maghreb and the Middle East, where it is often used in official and educational venues, but it is somewhat different from the spoken vernaculars in those countries.

### Foreign Language Policy Decisions

With respect to the teaching of foreign languages, there are a number of interconnected policy decisions that administrators and educators must make. First, they must decide the relative emphasis to give to foreign languages in both educational and public affairs. In addition to this general decision, there are a series of more specific architectural decisions about the organization of foreign language teaching in the formal education system that have to be made: (a) when to start foreign language instruction; (b) what proportion and what kinds of students will receive foreign language teaching as a mandatory or as an optional subject; (c) in what grades and for how many

hours or years should foreign languages be taught; (d) should the foreign languages be taught as subjects to be studied or as media of instruction in teaching other subjects; (e) how many and which languages should be taught; (f) how should standards of achievement be set and assessed, and (g) how to recruit and train teachers. With a few exceptions, in most countries the precise form of foreign language pedagogy to be used is not the subject of official policy, leaving the choice to individual teachers and textbook publishers.

### Categories of Countries by Linguistic Context

While most scholarly attention to foreign language policy has concentrated on Europe, it is instructive to examine it more broadly throughout the world. In doing so, it is useful to divide countries into a number of categories according to differences in the linguistic contexts in which they teach foreign languages. Each of the linguistic contexts makes a difference in both the emphasis given to foreign language education and how the system is structured. The classification of countries used here is (1) mosaic countries with a large number of important domestic languages; (2) monolingual countries where languages other than English are the primary mother tongue; (3) English-mother-tongue countries, (4) Continental Europe. The rank order of these categories roughly parallels differences in the relative importance of foreign language teaching, ranging from little to highly important.

#### Mosaic Countries with Numerous Important Domestic Languages

The majority of countries in the world have five or more important indigenous languages. In many such countries, the overwhelming language policy issues are concerned with the development and relative standing of multiple national languages, and the languages of major important regional minorities, autochthonous peoples, and immigrant groups. Foreign language instruction tends to be given limited importance. This situation is characteristic of many of the countries of Africa where the official status of the many indigenous languages is under negotiation, and where corpus language policy issues such as the determination of standard versions of indigenous languages, the development of scripts, the promotion of literacy, and the management of the transition from vernaculars used in the home to standardized school languages are still major tasks for language policy

makers. Where foreign language instruction is developed in mosaic countries, the language studied tends to be English as a world language, and to a lesser extent French, in former French colonies. In many of the latter countries, the proportion of students enrolled in the study of English as opposed to French is rising. In Cambodia, for instance, when students are given a choice, they choose English over French by a two-to-one margin. In Vietnam, another former French colony, about 90% of the schools teach English as the first foreign language.

Where colonial or foreign languages are taught in mosaic countries, the teaching tends to be in private schools, or, when in public schools, at the secondary and tertiary levels, often on an optional basis. Knowledge of the colonial language serves as a screening device for upward mobility and entrance into the cosmopolitan environment. Only rarely is more than one foreign language offered or taken in mosaic societies.

#### **Non-European Linguistically Homogeneous Countries**

In countries outside of Europe where a single domestic language predominates, foreign language instruction tends to concentrate almost exclusively on English. In Japan, for instance, the teaching of English has been a focus of language policy since the Meiji restoration, although only recently for the general populace. Although the study of English is not a compulsory subject, 90% of Japanese students receive English instruction. Other foreign languages are given much less emphasis. When taught, non-English foreign languages tend to be in private schools, in universities that specialize in the teaching of foreign languages, and in schools that prepare business people for foreign assignments.

The teaching of English presents special problems for countries such as Japan, whose home languages belong to unrelated language families. For one thing, students take considerably longer to master the language. Second, it is difficult to train teachers so that they can approximate native speakers and can employ teaching strategies different from those they are accustomed to in learning or teaching their own language. The Japanese solution to these problems is to import British and American students to serve on a temporary basis as native speaker assistants in Japan and to send Japanese teachers into classrooms in the United States in which Japanese is taught to perform similar functions and to observe American language teaching styles. Other countries use study abroad for raising the command of English among their teachers, and the development of country-specific varieties of English enable countries to train their teachers at home.

A similar emphasis on the teaching of English is found in most Southeast Asian countries—Brunei, Burma, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand—and in the countries of Central and South America. China, while a mosaic country with extensive internal linguistic variety, with respect to the teaching of foreign languages it acts like a monolingual society, promoting the overarching *lingua franca* Putonghua, and it teaches English as the primary foreign language. English is taught selectively in some secondary schools, and China is experimenting with requiring it at the college level.

Israel has a large (18%) Arabic-speaking minority which by and large resides in a separate sector of the country. In the Jewish sector, 60% of the population was born outside of the country and speaks a wide variety of languages. The official government statement on foreign language teaching, *1996 Policy for Language Education in Israel*, makes provision for language maintenance of immigrant languages. However, in language policy, it tends to act like a non-English speaking monolingual or bilingual country. The official language of Israel is Modern Hebrew, but in the Palestinian portion of Israel, Modern Standard Arabic is taught. In the two linguistic sectors, the teaching of each other's language is required. Foreign language instruction is by and large confined to English, which all students are required to study at the elementary and secondary levels.

#### **English-Mother-Tongue Countries**

In all of these countries, the presence of English, the world language—one that is predominant in international discourse, in science, business, and in a large sector of the popular entertainment culture—lowers the motivation for governments and educational institutions to teach other languages and, most important, for students to study them. The more general humanistic motivations for studying a foreign language—personal enrichment and multicultural understanding—are less persuasive to both students and educational administrators.

Furthermore, in each of the English-mother-tongue countries, policy toward domestic languages demands a substantial amount of attention. In New Zealand, the primary issue is the maintenance of Maori. In the UK, it is the support of regional minority languages: Welsh and Gaelic. In Ireland it is the rejuvenation of Irish. In Australia it is the maintenance of the aboriginal languages, and support for immigrant languages, there called 'community languages.' In the UK, it is problems with the languages of the South Asian immigrant communities. In the US, it is the provision of early education in the home language for immigrant

children legally designated as having Limited English Proficiency (LEP), some 3 million students, or about 6.7% of all students. Three-quarters of LEP students are Hispanic.

The countries where English is the mother tongue may in turn be divided into two categories: (a) those located in continents far from Europe such as Canada, Australia, and the US; and (b) the UK and Ireland in which the foreign language teaching system is a more limited version of mainland Europe.

**Category (a) English-Mother-Tongue Countries Distant from Europe** The major countries in category (a)—Canada, Australia, and the United States—have extensive foreign language teaching systems, but in scale and reach they are considerably more limited than in those in Continental Europe. They tend to start later, reach a smaller per cent of educational institutions, are less mandatory, and have sharp drops in enrollment and major pedagogical gaps across educational levels.

Foreign language policy making in each of these countries is largely decentralized, the responsibility of provincial, state, or local governments, or, in the United States, of individual school districts, schools, and teachers. Accordingly, the language educational systems vary significantly from one section of the country to another, with some sections relatively strong in foreign language teaching and other sections weak. Australia has had a number of attempts at centralized policy making for foreign language teaching systems (Lo Bianco, 1987), and for several decades the study of foreign languages has been actively promoted both by government and by university-based centers established for this purpose. However, support by the Commonwealth government has waxed and waned over the years. The United States has no mechanism for national foreign language planning, nor has there been any sustained national advocacy for the expansion of the foreign language teaching system. Moreover, all policy, where there is one, is made at the level of the state, the school district, and the individual teacher.

In one respect, category (a) English-mother-tongue countries distant from Europe have more fully developed foreign language educational systems than the UK and Europe. Because they do not need to teach English as a foreign language, and because the expectation is somewhat less that their citizens will come to actively use their foreign language competencies as adults, particularly with respect to European languages, the choice of which languages to teach is somewhat freer. Accordingly, each country has dedicated a portion of its system to expanding the geographic coverage of the languages taught. In the

western part of Canada, the substantial immigration from Asia has increased the number of students who elect to study Asian languages. Australia has provided substantial Commonwealth government support to an initiative called National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools (NALSAS). Its goal was to expand the coverage of Asian languages. As a result, in 2000 some 23.4% of Australian students, about 750 000 of all students, were studying an Asian language.

In the United States, which languages are taught is heavily influenced by the preferences of students, and they have drifted away from traditional European languages. Before World War I, most students who studied a foreign language in school were enrolled in Latin and Greek. In the early decades of the twentieth century, language choice followed the British and European pattern of emphasizing German and French. In recent years, enrollments in the United States have shifted overwhelmingly to Spanish, not as a European language but as a language of the Americas. In addition, U.S. governmental policy has fostered the growth of instruction in a great many of the non-Western languages of East Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. They were introduced first in the universities but are now spreading into colleges and secondary schools. Even primary schools have seen an increase in the study of non-Western languages. While they represent only 2% of enrollments in secondary schools, led by Chinese and Japanese, their enrollments have been increasing. At the collegiate and university level, 21% of the students enrolled in foreign language classes are studying a non-Western European language. It takes longer for English speakers to master these languages. According to the Defense Language Institute in the United States, which teaches many languages, it takes about five times longer for an English speaker to learn Japanese or Chinese than to learn French or German. As a consequence, a number of architectural challenges arise for foreign language teaching systems: a shortage of qualified teachers; low enrollment classes, particularly at the advanced level; and special problems of using immigrant native speakers as instructors who are untrained in foreign language pedagogy and have a limited knowledge of the language of the students they are teaching.

The individual countries in category (a) differ considerably in the architecture of their foreign language teaching systems. Canada is a prime example of a linguistically binary country (Lambert, 1999), that is, a country in which two sections of the country have different mother-tongues—in this case English and French. The rationale for Canada's bilingual education program is primarily domestic, the promotion

of a single national identity in a culturally divided country. It is not the promotion of foreign language skills. If the teaching of French in the Anglophone sections and the teaching of English in Quebec were considered foreign language instruction, Canada's foreign language education system would be among the most extensive in the world. Indeed, its innovations in second-language teaching have introduced a variety of new pedagogical practices, particularly in the development of immersion language instruction, which have influenced foreign language instruction throughout the world. In the full-immersion system, children start to study the second language in early primary school years, and throughout their schooling a variety of subject matter courses is taught in the second language. Second-language instruction can require up to 5000 hours of instruction time in the primary and secondary school years, although most students receive a lesser amount of language education.

In Australia, most states and territories require students to take at least 3 years of a foreign language. Language education generally starts in primary school, but in the early years it is primarily aimed at cultural awareness rather than skill acquisition. In many states, language study is mandatory from mid-primary school through grade 8 when compulsory language instruction stops. This results in a huge drop in enrollments in school years 9 and 10, when fewer than 50% of students study languages other than English. By year 12, the per cent has dropped even further to only 13.2%. One survey noted: "The general level of language study in Australia has fallen dramatically in the past twenty-five years. In the 1960s, about 40% of final year school students studied a language other than English. Today fewer than 1% of all higher education students complete a language unit at any stage in their course" (Erebus Consulting Partners, 2002: Chap. 2, p. 11).

In the US, only about one-third (31%) of elementary schools offers foreign language instruction, but only about 15% of all students receive it. Moreover, in elementary school at least half of the courses tend to be pointed toward general language familiarization rather than the attainment of proficiency. As in Australia, most of them provide less than two hours per week of language instruction. While 86% of U.S. secondary schools provide foreign language instruction, usually for five hours per week, enrollment is generally optional, and 40% of secondary school students receive no foreign language instruction at all. Moreover, the duration of language study tends to be limited—80% of enrollees receive two years or less of language study. Only about 50% of the students enrolled in any one year of language study continue to the next level. In the year 2000, only

13.2% of all students at grade level 12 were enrolled in foreign language courses (Lambert, 2000), and only about half of secondary school students receive any foreign language instruction at all. A substantial portion of students who study a foreign language begin that study at the college level. Half of these post-secondary institutions require that by the time their students graduate from college they have had some foreign language study at some point in their education, sometimes just a year. However, only 10% of all college students study any foreign language while they are in college.

Although the United States has no mechanism or tradition of centralized language planning, there has been one major governmental initiative born in its diplomatic and military training programs that has had a major effect on foreign language teaching policy throughout the country. Those government schools and training programs developed a system of oral interviews and a ladder scale of descriptors to measure the level of language proficiency. This technology was adopted by one of the major foreign language teachers' organizations, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), which diffused it widely throughout the field. The ACTFL scale together with the development of a related set of language-specific standards, effectively promoted the shift from the grammar-translation pedagogical style to the more interactive, oral, less grammar-oriented pedagogical style.

**Category (b) English-Mother-Tongue Countries in Europe** In those English-speaking countries neighboring continental Europe—the UK and Ireland—the scale of their foreign language teaching systems falls midway between the more fully developed systems in Europe and the other, distant from Europe, English-mother-tongue countries. Like the other English-speaking countries, the UK accommodates several regionally distinct languages—Welsh and Gaelic—but the domain of those languages remains almost entirely within the UK, in Wales and Scotland, on home territory.

With respect to the study of foreign languages, the UK remains behind its European partners in total modern foreign language education. In continental Europe, pupils start earlier and continue longer.

In the UK in general, the National Curriculum for Modern Foreign Languages requires by statute the study of a foreign language in secondary schools where the average amount of time is 140 minutes per week or about 10% of classroom time. Achievement levels also are nationally specified. The intention is to have all students from ages 11 to 16 study a foreign language for about 120 minutes

per week. Students can opt to study a second language in secondary school, but only 5% of the students do so, down from 10% five years earlier. The government has made the study of any foreign language optional for all 14- to 19-year-olds and limited statutory requirements to 3 years, resulting in a 50% drop in instruction in state schools. This would be offset by the provision of an entitlement program making foreign language instruction available at the primary level. The study of a foreign language in upper secondary school is optional, and only about 10% of the students study one. It is predicted that this will result in the wholesale dropping of language study by vocationally oriented students.

Throughout the school system, instruction in modern foreign language is heavily concentrated on the Western European languages: 62% in French and 25% in German, although the number of students sitting for A-level exams in Urdu, Russian, and Japanese has increased. As in the United States, England has a substantial amount of foreign language education in higher education. It may be taught in a language or discipline department or in a school of foreign languages that serves both majors and students training to be specialists in other disciplines. Languages may be taught *ab initio* for beginning students or advanced for those who have taken A level exams in a language prior to admission. At the university level, 34% of the courses given are in French and 32% in German. The rest of the courses are primarily in Italian or Spanish.

England has played a central role in the development of pan-European language policy in the Council of Europe and in such collective foreign language advocacy efforts as Europe's Year of Language. It has had major continuing foreign language advocacy centers such as The Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (CILT) and the Nuffield Foundation.

Ireland's foreign language educational system resembles that of the UK but on a somewhat smaller scale. It does not make the study of foreign languages a compulsory subject. Rather the emphasis is on the teaching of Irish, the historic language of the country. However, in practice most students do study a foreign language. For instance, students in the 12- to 14-year-old age group spend about 140 minutes per week in the study of foreign languages. As in the UK, the languages most frequently studied are French and German.

### Continental Europe

In many respects, the home of foreign language instruction lies in Europe. In terms of the policy

decisions that must be made, most of these countries start foreign language instruction earlier, promote it more aggressively, make it more compulsory, continue it longer, require or recommend that each student study a larger number of languages, assess it more deliberately and consistently, are more likely to use it as a medium of instruction, are more likely to establish a centralized assessment system, and are more systematic in developing explicit national policies than the countries in the other three linguistic categories of nations.

The enhanced scale and strength of European foreign language teaching systems rest in part on the fact that a majority of the population—53% according to a Eurobarometer survey of residents more than 15 years of age (European Commission, 2003)—reports the capacity to carry on a conversation in a foreign language, and the proportion is even higher for younger age groups. Moreover, 93% of those surveyed believe it is important that their children learn other European languages. There is some variation among European countries in the extent of adult multilingualism. The Luxembourgers, Netherlanders, and Danes do best, while Russians, Spaniards, and Poles report less competency. The French come somewhere in the middle. The level of adult support for multilingualism is both cause and effect in determining the scale of foreign language teaching systems.

There is a considerable difference among countries in the architecture of foreign language teaching. A number of comparative inventories are available that compare different systems (Bergentoft, 1994; Dickson and Cumming, 1996; Eurydice, 2000). John Trim describes some of the major determinants of the scale of development of foreign language teaching within European countries. He reports that "a country is more likely to value L2 proficiency if (1) it is internally multilingual (established territorial minorities); (2) it is a small country, but not geographically or politically isolated; (3) its neighbors speak a different language; (4) its own language is not widely spoken and not used as a vehicle for international communication; (5) its export/import trade is a higher percentage of GDP; and (6) its travel trade is a higher proportion of foreign trade and GDP." (Trim, 1994: 12).

In addition to differences in overall scale, individual countries within Europe make different choices in the various features of their language policy. Traditionally, the study of a foreign language was a requirement for the academically oriented. Now almost all European countries by law require the study of at least one foreign language for all students. In many countries, the study of two foreign languages is required—for instance, in Belgium, Denmark,

Finland, Greece, The Netherlands, and Sweden—and in the others the study of a second foreign language, while provided, is voluntary, with schools and students given varying degrees of choice. There is more variation in upper secondary education, where some academic specialties such as classics, humanities, economics, and the social sciences emphasize foreign language learning, and other academic specialties do not. In many of these countries, there are schools specializing in foreign languages.

One of the indicators of the degree of a country's commitment to foreign language study is the age at which the first foreign language appears on the compulsory curriculum. In most European countries students must start learning a foreign language between the ages of 8 and 12. In Austria, Italy, Luxembourg, and Norway, they start at age 6 or 7. Most students continue language study for about 10 years, receiving from 135 to 180 minutes per week in language classes. Most countries only teach foreign languages as subjects, using them as media of instruction in limited subject matter areas such as science or special, vocationally oriented courses such as travel and trade. Luxembourg, however, maintains a full-immersion system with all subject matter courses taught in French or German throughout the educational system, as well as Letzeburgisch, the local language. Their students tend to go to France or Germany for advanced education.

One of the most important language policy issues that tend to be determined at the national level is which foreign languages to teach and in what order. While the international goal is the creation of a pluralistic Europe in which all citizens learn the languages of one or a number of other countries of the region, in almost every country in Western Europe the first foreign language taught and taken by most students is English. In the binary and triad countries such as Belgium and Switzerland, the predominant languages taught—French, German, or Italian—are those of both an internal linguistic region and of a neighboring country. In the countries of Eastern Europe that were formerly under Russian hegemony, German is often substituted for the formerly compulsory Russian, but the teaching of English is spreading.

Almost all European countries have explicit, comprehensive foreign language plans. Sometimes they result from private surveys exploring existing strengths, needs, and weakness, such as the The Netherlands's *Horizon Taal* (van Els, 1990) or the Nuffield Foundation surveys (Moys, 1998). More often, these plans comprise the organization and specific goals of foreign language study (e.g., Sweden's National Agency for Education, 2001). One of the most remarkable aspects of European language policy

is the influential role of international organizations—in particular, the Council of Europe and the European Union—in advancing foreign language teaching policy across Europe.

Since the adoption of the European Cultural Convention in 1954, the Council of Europe has been engaged in creating a transnational consensus on foreign language teaching policy. Its varied activities have had an immense impact on member countries' own policies. The Council assisted in countries' assessments of their language needs. It was central to the transformation of language pedagogy from a grammar-translation format to one emphasizing communicative language competence. It developed manuals setting learning objectives and goals for several levels of foreign language proficiency. The first manual, published as *Threshold Level 1990* (van Ek and Trim, 1998) changed the focus of language teaching from what the learner needs to know to what he or she must be able to do to function adequately in a foreign language. The first and most general model, the Threshold Level, has been formally adopted throughout Europe to cover 20 languages. Using a similar approach, a Waystage model was also developed for a more elementary level of competence, and later, a model for more advanced learners called Vantage Level. The Council (Council of Europe, 2001) issued a more comprehensive Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. It covers more generally a wide variety of policy issues in language learning. It also establishes a hierarchy of levels of language proficiency that can be used across languages and countries in Europe. This skill hierarchy differentiates proficient, independent, and basic language users, and provides specific skill level descriptors for listening, speaking, and writing. This general scaling of language competencies as expressed in the Common European Framework is intended to be applicable across languages and countries (Language Policy Division, 2003). A number of countries, e.g., The Netherlands and England, have already begun to calibrate their own systems of ranking language skill with those of the Common Framework, and more countries are working toward that end. Moreover, these internationally agreed upon scales of competency are also intended to be used by individual learners in making up a language portfolio to provide evidence of their language skills for use in education, transnational employment, or international travel.

In the other major European international organization, the European Union (EU), during the early years, in matters relating to foreign language policy attention was concentrated primarily on matters of economic or vocational relevance. The European

Commission has adopted a much wider perspective on the promotion of foreign language learning throughout Europe (European Commission, 1997). Specific EU funding programs have been especially productive in enhancing the foreign language education system. The LINGUA program within SOCRATES supported training opportunities for language teachers to study abroad. The LEONARDO DA VINCI program supported the development of language skills for international business. A new program, COMENIUS, is primarily concerned with language education in schools.

### Future Developments

It is difficult to predict the future of foreign language teaching policy. How long the seemingly universal trend of teaching English as the first foreign language will continue is unclear. There are some who hope its role will diminish (Phillipson, 2003) and others who predict its hybridization and possible loss of supremacy (Graddol, 1997, 2004). Were English to cease being the first foreign language to be taught around the world, it is difficult to predict what would succeed it. The perennial drive to spread the use of Esperanto as a common world language has had only modest success (Corsetti, 2003). And whether Europe will complement its inward-looking policy and adopt a broader range of foreign languages to teach is problematic. However, the teaching and learning of foreign languages will remain high on the world's agenda.

*See also:* Language Policy in Multilingual Educational Contexts; Languages in Tertiary Education; Languages of Wider Communication; World Englishes.

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