

The Power of Language: Language Policy in Non-Anglophone Countries

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Background:

This report is based on notes taken at the 'Power of Language' conference, which took place in Berlin from 14-16 June 2007. Talks were given under a number of different themes and, as suggested in the title, this strand of the congress concentrated on the close connection between language policy and the political will required to enact such policy. The key message underlying the thematic presentations and discussions is that the creation of a coherent, national language policy requires political will and this in turn requires all interested parties to continue to promote the importance of a diversity of languages in an increasingly globalised world. The *Sprachenpolitik* (Language Policy) strand of the congress identified the interested parties as the business community, politicians, cultural organisations and language professionals and provided a voice for each of them to draw upon experiences from across the world. The presentations highlighted developments and interesting practice in language policy in the emerging economic powers of India and China, in the developing countries of Africa as well as in the traditional economic powers of USA, Japan and the European Union. In doing so, the presentations and discussions raised issues relevant to the current position in Scotland and it is these aspects that will now be developed more fully.

English as Lingua franca

In Scotland we are accustomed to considering the dominance of English as the world language of business and youth culture from the perspective of the difficulty this causes us in convincing our young people that "English alone isn't enough." Throughout the rest of the world the motivation of students to learn English is clearly not a problem but interestingly the unanimous conclusion of all presenters is the same: "English alone isn't enough."

In the opening presentation, David Graddol, while acknowledging the role of English as Lingua franca with all its advantages and disadvantages, stressed the value of a diversity of foreign languages from a global perspective and highlighted the need for many languages in addition to English. This point was reinforced by the representatives of the business community, who recognised the dominant role of English for the initial business engagement but highlighted the importance of the ability to operate in the local and regional languages to really develop the business and to integrate into the local culture.

Dominant Role of English in Language Policy

This dominance of English as the world language of business and of youth culture is also reflected in the dominant role of English in national language policies in Europe and throughout the world. While here in

Scotland, it is French that dominates the school curriculum with the other languages competing for a place, in other countries the clear priority is to develop competence in English leaving other languages (local and foreign) competing for time and space. Many interesting and different models have been developed to deal with this tension and to take forward the early learning of modern languages. Given the dominance of English as a world language, many countries begin the study of English in pre-school, early or mid primary and are able to provide continuity throughout the primary stage, as increasingly the primary teachers themselves have a reasonable level of competence in English. Many countries also start the study of a second foreign language in late primary or early secondary, while making the study of the first foreign language (usually English) compulsory for most of secondary schooling.

Although the picture emerging is one of enormous variability across the world, there appears to be widespread agreement on the desired communicative methodology and pedagogical principles appropriate for the learning of a modern language in the early stages. The most successful models draw upon research into how children have acquired their first language and seek to replicate this in the study of a second language through the provision of increased time and intensity in the form of bilingual or partial immersion education. Another favoured approach is a language awareness model, not dealing with one additional language alone but instead giving access to a number of languages and cultures, in order to develop underlying competences such as meta-linguistic awareness and intercultural sensitivity.

Diversity and Multiculturalism

While acknowledging the important utilitarian purpose of language learning as a means of enabling citizens to deal with the business of everyday life in another country, great emphasis was also placed on the importance of language learning as a means to achieve a wider and deeper understanding of the way of life and forms of thought of other peoples and of their cultural heritage. The valuable language and cultural (as well as economic) resource provided by the increasing numbers of migrant workers was highlighted, as was the need to develop intensive language programmes to assist such workers to develop a basic level of competence in the main language of education so that they might access qualifications and become active citizens. How these migrant workers can be supported and how their languages and cultures can be valued and encouraged are clearly important and relevant issues for Scotland where the number of pupils who speak languages other than English continues to rise.

Closely linked to this emphasis on the most relevant contexts for language use and on the multicultural aspects of language learning

was the concept of plurilingualism and how a variety of languages could be offered for a variety of purposes. The concept of progression in language learning always being assessed in terms of greater depth and study of one or two languages was both supported and challenged. On the one hand the importance of providing for a high level of language competence in key languages was clearly acknowledged but there was a clear move away in most countries from the 'one size fits all' approach. In addition to the more traditional 'language specialist' route, many countries are developing a plurilingual approach where for many young people the more relevant target of their language learning is a lower more functional level of competence in a range of languages. Again there is a clear relevance in these developments for Scotland where the survival of languages other than French continues to cause concern and viable approaches to diversification are sought.

Conclusion

The language policy strand of 'The Power of Language' was of great interest and relevance to the position in Scotland, where there is currently the opportunity with a new executive and with the ongoing review of the school curriculum (viz. *Curriculum for Excellence*) to revisit the topic of a national language policy. The congress highlighted interesting developments happening throughout the world aimed at addressing concerns and challenges that we in Scotland share and from which we can learn. It highlighted many of the issues that a national language policy for Scotland would need to address and also suggested possible solutions that such a policy might include. The event also examined the process by which such policies are eventually arrived at. It is through the perseverance, dedication and enthusiasm of language professionals that the importance of language learning and issues concerning diversity and multiculturalism are raised and that other interested parties including the business and political communities are brought onboard. That is the challenge facing language professionals in Scotland and *Curriculum for Excellence* possibly provides the opportunity to develop a coherent language policy by asking us to stress the importance of language learning in developing Successful Learners, Confident Individuals, Effective Contributors and Responsible Citizens.