

WORKSHOP 4

Language(s) teaching and learning strategies for understanding and communication

Background Document

“Issues of Language and Language Teaching Policy”
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Introduction

In human society communication between people is a necessity of life. Human beings use a variety of means of communication, for all of which they have devised ‘systems of signification’. The most distinctively human communication system of all, however, is verbal language. Verbal language is usually simply referred to as ‘language’, although other such ‘systems of communication’, both human and animal, are also regularly called ‘languages’. (Verbal) language is by far the most elaborate and complex of all languages. Moreover, it appears in many different shapes. Mankind has developed thousands of languages, many of which are so wide apart that they are mutually unintelligible.¹

Language is of prime importance in communication among individuals and between groups of people. Most individuals are born into and brought up in only one language. Communication between (groups of) people with different language backgrounds is always to a greater or lesser extent problematic. Nations and communities the members of which are native to a number of different languages, may have grave internal communication problems to cope with. In plurilingual societies and communities language(s) and language use planning is a first requirement. For example, such nations will have to sort out what language(s) to promote to the status of ‘national’ language, what language(s) to select for use in their educational systems as language(s) of instruction, and what (foreign) language(s) to offer to pupils to learn in school besides their native language. In international plurilingual organisations members have to work out arrangements as to what language(s) to use for internal, institutional communication.

Language is also fundamental in forming and expressing both individual and group identities. Human beings at a very young age become so much accustomed to the language of their surroundings that they lose the natural capacity to properly perceive the sound system of all other languages. They feel at one with their mother-tongue²; the language in question forms part of the individual’s identity. Similarly, people who share the same language tend to look upon that language as an essential element of their group identity. It is not unusual for

¹ ‘Linguistics’ as the study and analysis of language has a long tradition, but experienced its most dramatic development –both in width and depth- in the second half of the 20th century. The discipline has a great many ramifications, its sub-disciplines dealing with, on the one hand, the psychological, sociological and ethnological aspects of language and language use, and with the aspects of language form and content on the other. To see how diverse the study of language has become, a look at the tables of content of such publications in the field of language education as Wodak & Corson (1997), Baker & Prys Jones (1998) and Byram (2000) should suffice.

conflicts between groups to centre around or culminate in a linguistic conflict. Not only is the learning of –and communicating in- other languages a hard job to achieve for most people, but the adoption itself of such languages also often meets with feelings of emotional resistance.

Therefore, there are language and language use problems at a variety of levels and in a great variety of domains. Arrangements for all these levels and domains all –one way or another- require language political decisions. When it comes to ‘learning to live together’, from a politician’s point of view the most pressing language problem-areas in human society may well be: (1) the ‘status’ of languages, nationally and internationally, (2) the language(s) of instruction, (3) foreign language(s) instruction, and (4) language learning and teaching strategies. In each of these areas important developments may be observed and many political decisions wait to be taken.

1. National and international status of languages

‘Status’ issues occur both within and between nations, i.e. on national and international levels.² The following discussion is arranged in around this distinction, basically. One or two points, however, apply to both levels. In language planning discussions ‘status’ has always been very prominent. For further information on the issues dealt with here the reader may be referred to Kaplan & Baldauf (1997) and Wright (2000).³

The *internal* language situation differs widely from nation to nation. Whether a country is classified as ‘monolingual’, ‘bilingual’ or ‘plurilingual’, greatly depends first of all on what one’s definition of ‘language’ is. Language is a phenomenon that appears in many forms. Well known are the geographical variants that are called ‘dialects’ of the ‘main language’, but there are also language variants, or ‘dialects’, that are associated with social groups, from vernacular to ‘chic’ and ‘posh’. Moreover, there are specialised language variants: almost every occupational group has its own specific variant, which at least distinguishes itself from other variants by a jargon of its own. In this paragraph we restrict ourselves to the geographical dimension.

Only very few countries are truly monolingual; some countries pretend to be monolingual – usually by ignoring or underplaying the existence of minority languages, whether indigenous or brought in by immigrants. Most countries, therefore, are pluri- or multilingual. Multilingual countries display great variety in their choice of the language(s) of national intercourse. Often a choice is made for one language, occasionally for two or three. The language chosen is usually spoken by a majority of the population. But, sometimes either one of the few contemporary ‘international’ languages is adopted –very often the former colonial language, in many cases English or French-, or a, more neutral, ‘lingua franca’.⁴ The criteria for

² In order to make the argument not too complicated, we only distinguish ‘national’ and ‘international’ levels. Of course, what we say about ‘nations’, *mutatis mutandis*, also applies to other politically more or less autonomous geographical entities.

³ Part of the discussion in this paragraph is based on a previous treatment by the author in the ‘Final Public Lecture’ that he read when officially resigning from his Chair in Applied Linguistics at the University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands. A slightly extended version of the lecture will appear in *Current Issues in Language Planning* (see Van Els 2001).

⁴ By ‘lingua franca’ we generally mean any language used for communication between people with different language backgrounds, the language in question not being the native language of any of the participants. In the

selecting the national language(s) are diverse. (see Kaplan & Baldauf 1997:31ff.) Ideally, the choice “should result in the smallest possible disruption to the social structure”. In this context critical features for selection may be the internal political neutrality of the language; its dominance in number of native speakers or as the language of the wealthiest or the most powerful group; whether it has prestige and a great tradition of its own; and whether it is adequately equipped to help in the modernisation in cases where that is a major concern of the country. At the same time, the actual choice should not isolate the country from the outside world. If a country chooses for a language that has no international currency whatsoever, it will have to make sure that neither the nation nor its citizens are left without adequate provisions for their international communication needs. Most scientific and technical information, for example, in the major storage and retrieval networks is presented in just very few languages.

The main objective in choosing one or a very restricted number of national languages is usually the improvement of the internal communication process. A related, but often not articulated, objective is to build a more homogeneous nation, a nation that will feel united around its ‘national’ language, as a vital part of the nation’s identity. Loyalty to a shared language may foster group identity. The native language is often consciously used to help group formation (Paulston 1998:22) and it is quite common for people to think that “one language, one nation” is a principle of essential importance in the creation and the preservation of the nation state. The ‘national’ language has, thus, become a major patriotic issue and a key symbol of nationalism, which phenomenon has been particularly characteristic of nation-building in Europe since the French Revolution and the German Romantic Movement in the early 19th century. (see Coulmas 1991)

Whatever the motives, the choosing of a national language always implies reducing and simplifying linguistic variety. The fact that language is an important factor in both individual and group identification, makes language, in general, a very sensitive subject: all measures pertaining to detracting from the role and status of a language are easily perceived as affecting the position of the group concerned, and this, *mutatis mutandis*, also holds for measures affecting the international status of ‘national’ languages. And the sensitivity of the subject is enhanced by another close relationship in particular, viz. that between language and culture. Language is embedded in culture; language utterances cannot be made outside the context of a certain culture nor be fully interpreted separately from this culture. And, also, culture requires expression in language; therefore, culture cannot truly thrive without a language in which it can be expressed. For most people, this bond between language and culture is so strong that language and culture are invariably mentioned in one breath and that their fates are regarded as inseparable. A threat to linguistic variety is interpreted as a threat to cultural diversity. And, if cultural diversity is looked upon as a ‘great wealth’, as a treasure that should be cherished and guarded, the same is said of linguistic diversity. Any measure affecting the state and position of a language is, therefore, seen as a threat to the related culture. In international organisations like the European Union it is quite common to hear the view expressed that the existing multiformity of both cultures and languages should at all times be maintained and, what is more, be promoted.

However, statements to that effect are not always devoid of rhetorical exaggeration. The close link that holds between language and culture also manifests itself, for the many different language (sub-)variants, in more or less corresponding culture (sub-)variants. Just as ‘the’

Middle Ages, when the term was introduced, a lingua franca was always a mix of elements from different languages, which sailors used to communicate with people speaking foreign languages. Nowadays the term may refer to any language used as an international medium of communication; it is quite common to call English, as used in international communication, a lingua franca.

national language is a variable and varying phenomenon, 'the' national culture is much less of a monolithic entity than it is often made out to be. Within each of the commonly distinguished nation-related cultures -be they associated with larger entities such as 'European' and 'African' or smaller ones such as 'Icelandic' and 'Egyptian'-, a variety of subcultures may be distinguished, each of them of a clearly individual nature. Moreover, however closely linked languages and cultures may be, the link between each specific pair is hardly ever altogether unique. In general, it may be said that every individual language has the capacity to express various cultures and, also, that every individual culture may be expressed in a number of different languages. The loss, therefore, of a particular language does not necessarily entail the concomitant loss of (part of) the related culture. And finally, the relations that languages have with cultures can vary considerably in strength, i.e. there are degrees to which the content of languages is culture-specific. For example, the culture-specific content of many technically specialized languages can be very limited, especially when the language in question is used world-wide by the occupational group concerned. If all risk of ambiguity is to be precluded in international communication between people from different language and culture backgrounds, optimal transparency of the language used must be ensured. In languages designed for such situations -as for example in the kind of 'controlled' or 'reduced' English developed for the aircraft industry- one typically finds precise guidelines with regard to the use of grammar and vocabulary and, moreover, a minimum of cultural embedding.

In *international* contexts the issues underlying the sensitivity that adheres to the subject of the national language, are equally prominent, if not more. The feeling that measures regarding a language automatically will affect the nation in question, and that they will, of necessity, deeply hurt the 'national' culture, is very much at the core of the argumentation one hears in international language debates. We will also see this when, below, attention is paid to the internal, i.e. institutional, linguistic situation of international organisations. Before that, some other points need to be brought up.

If in a multilingual communicative setting only one language is used as the working-language, mother-tongue speakers of the preferred language have a natural advantage over those who are non-native to that language. The disadvantages of the latter, of course, can vary depending on their level of foreign-language competence, but hardly ever will the non-natives' competence be such that it equals that of the native conversation partners. Skilful and smart use of language is, at all times, a powerful tool in negotiations, but the additional advantage that one derives from being able to rely on one's native language in communication with non-natives, is a real asset if one is seeking to exercise dominance over one's conversation partners. It is, therefore, quite understandable in itself that language groups or nations should want to promote their language at the cost of other languages. Also, a lot is invested by many countries today in the promotion of the cause of their language. However, a top-league position cannot be achieved for a language, unless there is a real power-basis available in, for example, its economy. The national or international supremacy of a language is the outcome of the particular language-group's or country's economic and political power. Whenever that kind of power is lacking, it cannot be created simply by gaining a prominent position for the country's language.

In international organisations, especially if the members together bring in a great variety of languages, an important language political issue is what arrangement to choose for internal, institutional communication purposes. In co-operative organisations such as the United Nations or the European Union, where all member-states are fundamentally equal, it is common to take the view that no one should be handicapped because of the status of his native language within that organisation. International organisations, because of this,

sometimes opt for full equality of all the members' languages.⁵ A case in point is the European Union (EU), in which the present 15 member-states have a total of eleven working-languages at their disposal, a few countries sharing the same language; for instance, Ireland and the United Kingdom have English in common and Austria and Germany German.

With such a large number of working-languages, however, effective mutual understanding can at times be very hard to achieve and the communication process can be very cumbersome and inefficient in terms of time and energy spent. It is practically impossible, of course, to provide for full translation and simultaneous interpretation facilities for eleven languages under all circumstances, i.e. in all official and informal settings where members get together for deliberations on matters of vital importance to them; just consider the organisational and logistic measures involved. But even if such facilities can be provided, their contribution to an optimal understanding and communication is less effective than is commonly expected.⁶ The quality of translation, in particular of simultaneous interpretation, hardly ever reaches perfection and, unavoidably, is regularly deficient up to a point. The time lags that occur in simultaneous interpretation between the moment of utterance and the moment of hearing can be very annoying and, thus, may impede correct understanding. Communication may also be hampered by other causes. Speakers, who are sensitive to the special difficulties of the situation, may feel the inclination to somehow meet the interpreters in their hard task part of the way; they may decide –consciously or subconsciously- to adapt and especially simplify their language and, therefore, leave out metaphors and jokes, speak in short sentences and use direct language. Thus, in a very subtle way, their message may get changed, because nice distinctions are left out, and, unintentionally, speakers may even come across as very blunt and rude. The 'listeners', too, may contribute to a serious impairment of communication in such settings. Especially in situations where many 'minor' languages are being translated simultaneously, people have a tendency to make a sparing use of the translations provided and, in particular, to ignore those of the minor languages: the speakers of such languages are not heard at all in the end.

When within an organisation like the EU a general feeling arises that a diminution of the number of working-languages should be considered seriously, it turns out to be a difficult and complicated matter to solve what kind of arrangements to make in order to minimise to a more or less acceptable degree the handicaps of those members whose national languages are to be struck off the list and, at the same time, achieve the highest possible degree of both quality and effectiveness of communication. A great many things can be said in this connection. We will restrict ourselves to a few remarks.⁷ In part the remarks should also contribute to making measures of restriction as such less unacceptable to those whose languages are robbed of the status of working-language. First of all, it is important to realise that the context of an international organisation may be such that, eventually, the kind of specialised language variant arises that we have referred to above. The organisational setting constitutes its own 'domain of language use', the communicative needs of which are best served by using only a specific subset of the linguistic material available. The specialised language variants of such domains of language use, although primarily characterised by that kind of 'reduction', usually also exhibit their own specific features of jargon and style; the

⁵ For simplicity's sake we assume that each member-state only brings in one 'national' language. As we have seen, many countries in the world have more 'national' languages than one; Spain, for example, has one major national language, i.e. Castilian, but it has also recognised Catalan, Galician and Basque as official languages. In most international organisations, like the European Union, members can only bring in one national language each.

⁶ There is very little empirical evidence regarding the quality of communication of translation and interpretation settings. Most of the following observations are based on anecdotal evidence; for the situation within EU-institutions, see Abélès (1999:113).

⁷ For a fairly full treatment of the particular case of the EU, see Van Els 2001.

specific variant of 'institutional' language use is sometimes referred to as 'bureaucratese'. The higher the degree of specificity engendered by the particular domain of language use of an international institution, the more neutral with respect to 'cultural load' the language variant becomes. Over-against the gains of those whose native language is promoted to the position of the exclusive working-language of an international organisation, should be considered the fact that 'ownership' of the language in that domain will at least have to be shared with the non-natives. Another point is that measures taken regarding a language in such a specific domain, do not necessarily affect the use of the language in all other domains. A decision to take away from language X its status of working-language in the EU does not mean that the language is abolished altogether as the national language of the member-state(s) concerned. The range of application of language policy decisions may be delimited very precisely. Within the institutional domain of the EU there is room for further specification of the language policy of various sub-domains and/or different situations. Thus, if it may be desirable to cut down drastically on the number of working-languages in verbal communication settings, a continuation of full plurilingualism in all official written documents can go hand in hand; and, it may well be imperative under the present circumstances. Another, and final, point is this. If restriction of the number of working-languages is considered seriously because it seems inevitable, there is a lot to be said for choosing just one working-language and not two or three. First of all, the handicaps of the non-natives are fewer when they have to cope with only one foreign language. Secondly, the language in question stands more chance to develop into a genuine 'working-language', stripped of all specific cultural load and more truly owned by the non-natives; if more than one working-languages are operative, such developments are much less likely to occur and the handicaps for the non-natives will remain invariably high. There is only one variant of the 'few-working-languages-model' in which a more evenly spread distribution of the handicaps may be witnessed. In the variant the native speakers of the chosen working-languages are expected to actually speak in another language than their own, thus sharing the non-natives' handicaps at least with respect to the productive oral skill. Although the quality of the oral output is likely to be negatively affected under those circumstances by the fact that the amount of native-level contributions is drastically reduced, the other side is that the 'natives' will cease to dominate the communicative setting and that even they will constantly be conscious of the need to make serious efforts themselves to understand the others and to be understood by them. The chances of the kind of miscommunication that seems to be so characteristic of normal native/non-native communication -e.g., natives very light-heartedly assume that non-natives understand all their utterances, however fluently spoken- will diminish perceptibly and, therefore, the quality of communication will be enhanced.⁸

⁸ A proposal to this effect was made by the Danes when, in 1973, they were negotiating their entrance into the EU. It was turned down by the British and the French, who expected they had nothing to gain. (Wright 2000:174)

2. The language(s) of instruction

Whereas communicating in any other but one's own native language may at all times be problematic, having to receive one's education in a non-native language is as a rule far worse. This is true for all school subjects, but it is especially true for initial literacy teaching. When instruction is supplied in the native language, the expansion of known concepts and the acquisition of new ones –achieved, from early childhood, in the native tongue- can proceed smoothly and naturally and is not hindered or complicated by the additional learning hurdle of having to acquire the matching linguistic tools in another language.

However, there are numerous reasons and circumstances which may make it desirable, necessary and/or inevitable to give all or part of the instruction in a non-native language. In fact, a great many youngsters receive all their instruction in (an)other language(s) than their mother-tongue, which is particularly true if we also include all those born into local and regional dialects. Languages may be so 'small', i.e. spoken by so few people, that no instructional materials have been produced in them and/or no teachers are available trained to give instruction through these languages. Under those circumstances the choice of another, non-native, language of instruction becomes inevitable, unless one prefers to remedy the situation by changing the prevailing adverse circumstance(s). Using the native language may

also be considered undesirable and, therefore, the redressing of such adverse conditions inconvenient, if -for whatever reasons- the establishment of the favoured 'national' language has been proclaimed a major educational goal. The actual educational results of instruction through a non-native language are generally affected by the particular linguistic situation of the learner. It does make a difference if the pupil's native language is also the language of the surrounding societal setting and not just that of his particular home-situation.⁹ There are more such reasons for deliberately choosing a non-native language for instructional purposes, even if from an educational point of view there is no actual necessity for it. When a country lacks proper provisions for further and higher education, one may choose as the language of instruction the national language of the country that students preferably go to for continued studies. These and similar situations have in common that the ultimate goal is to provide people with the best linguistic tool to get the best possible education; the pupils concerned, at least in the long run, wind up receiving all their instruction in the non-native language. Whenever there is a possibility of giving (part of) the instruction in the -minority- mother-tongue, experience and tradition have it that the best practice is to start initial instruction off in the mother-tongue, then to introduce the non-native language by its side, and later to have the non-native language gradually take over altogether.

In other instances choosing a non-native language of instruction serves other than general educational purposes. These instances all have in common that, basically, the principal aim is to acquire competence in the language in question. A first case is the situation in which instruction in most or all of the school-subjects is given in one of the foreign languages of the prevailing curriculum, because in that way one hopes to achieve a higher command in the foreign language -or to teach it more quickly- than is normally the case through the regular foreign language teaching classes. This approach has recently been attracting a great deal of attention in some Western European countries and has come to be referred to as 'Content-based Instruction' (CBI) and 'Content and Language Integrated Learning' (CLIL).¹⁰ Although this approach has much in common with what is regularly called 'Bilingual Education', it is not normally categorised as such. The major focus in Bilingual Education is the learning of a minority language, mostly by the natives of the minority language concerned but also sometimes by majority language group students. Examples of this are the well-known 'Immersion Programmes' in Canada, in which -mainly- French is learned by majority speakers of English.¹¹

3. Foreign language(s) instruction

⁹ Harlech-Jones (1997:243) has worked out this point with respect to English as the favoured language of instruction in Namibian primary education; the disappointing results may largely have to be accounted for by the fact that the English language is hardly spoken in the communities of many Namibian pupils.

¹⁰ A recent discussion of CBI is to be found in Crandall 1999.

¹¹ Cummins & Corson (1997) present an extensive Reader on a wide selection of bilingual programmes.

For most people, as we have seen, the conditions within the country they live in are such that, for internal purposes only, they have to learn one or more other languages than their native tongue. Growing internationalisation makes that more and more people have to learn one or more additional languages in order to be able to function outside of their country. Sometimes languages of the two categories coincide; the learning of French by Anglophone Canadians serves an internal and an external purpose. However much the respective learning processes may have in common, from a didactic/pedagogic point of view it is usually very helpful to distinguish the learning processes and teaching procedures of the two categories. They are regularly referred to as ‘second’ and ‘foreign’ language learning and teaching, respectively. Learning another language, when it is the language daily surrounding the learner, is a much more intensive and more ‘natural’ experience than learning another language when it is only ‘available’ in the ‘unnatural’ surroundings of the classroom situation. In this section we will focus on foreign language instruction only. More specifically we will deal with the language planning aspects of the choice of what foreign languages to offer in education.¹²

A basic question that has to be answered before one discusses the choice of (foreign) languages to be learned and/or taught, is with whom the authority to take planning decisions actually lies and, also, how far such authority extends. There are ‘levels’ of decision-making: the pupils and their parents are one level; the schools, both the School Board or the Head and the teachers, form another; and a third level is constituted by the educational authorities, both regionally and nationally. There are also different kinds of decision-issues to be discerned: for example, the languages offered in schools may be made obligatory for all or for a particular subset of pupils, or the obligation may also just concern the number of foreign languages to be learned leaving the choice of the particular language(s) open to the pupils. We will restrict ourselves to some questions that concern planning decisions at the ‘national’ level.

If a country makes up its mind as to what foreign languages its citizens should (be made to) learn, a great variety of factors have to be taken into account. These factors, also in their combination, may differ widely from country to country and, of necessity, may lead to very diverging national planning decisions. The internal language situations of countries differ, as we have seen, but so do countries differ one from the other in their relations with neighbouring countries and with the international organisations in which they participate.

The factors that have to be accounted for in the decision-making process, may be socio-economic, e.g. the amount of foreign trade with different parts of the world and countries. But they may also be psychological (:for example, what esteem are speakers of other languages held in?) and educational (:for example, the availability of a sufficient and sufficiently qualified teaching corps for the languages in question). In order to arrive at rational policy-decisions, the first thing to secure is a proper insight into the country’s foreign language needs. In our view foreign languages needs analysis tries to answer the question for what purposes people would like to become competent in (a) particular foreign language(s); needs analysis reveals the causes or motives people have for learning foreign languages.¹³ There has been surprisingly little principled discussion of the many different arguments for the learning and teaching of foreign languages. One mostly leaves it at distinguishing such polar pairs as ‘individual’ versus ‘national’; or ‘non-utilitarian’, ‘cultural’ or ‘formative’ versus ‘utilitarian’, ‘directly useful’ or ‘capitalisable’. Such distinctions are not clear-cut, nor is there –for

¹² We base the following discussion mainly on Van Els 2000.

¹³ A divergent approach to needs analysis one finds in the well-known Modern Languages Project of the Council of Europe; at the centre of the Project’s work is a model for the detailed specification of foreign language behaviour in terms of ‘notions’ and ‘functions’. (see Brindley 2000). Although the suggestion to the contrary is often made, the work of this Project cannot be seen as an actual analysis of needs, i.e. in terms of a “systematic attempt to discover the needs for which a learner or group of learners requires a language” (Clark 1999:539). See also footnote 16.

example- a fundamental opposition between ‘cultural’ and ‘directly useful’. The main objection, however, is that when a foreign language policy has to be formulated and choices have to be made as to which languages to teach, distinctions of this type are of very little help. A much more helpful criterion for distinguishing needs seems to lie in ‘the degree of communicative competence required to fulfil that need’, on the basis of which three broad categories of needs may be discriminated: a) *communicative needs* (:one wants to be competent in a particular language to be able to effectively communicate in that language); b) *language competence-related needs* (:one wants, for example, to become acquainted with another nation’s culture, for which purpose competence in the language is a great asset but not a prerequisite); c) *needs distantly, or not at all, related to language competence* (:one wants to develop particular social and/or intellectual skills of a general nature, which may also be engendered through other school subjects). From a) through b) to c) the relation between needs and foreign language competence becomes more and more indirect and diffuse. In cases where policy choices have to be made between the learning/teaching of (a) foreign language(s) and of other subjects, or where one has to choose between particular languages, needs of category a) seem to carry much more weight than those of the other two categories. (see Van Els 2000:467-8) This being said, it should be added that a needs pattern, even if clearly defined along these lines, does not as such lead directly to policy choices. The weighing of the three categories against each other is a separate issue, which from situation to situation may lead to diverging outcomes. Different countries may well attach different weights to such diverging needs as their commercial and cultural interests.

Of course, even if needs are the major category of factors in the decision-taking process, they are not the only one, as has already been mentioned above. Besides the categories of ‘psychological’ and ‘educational’ factors, in the literature two other categories have been suggested, i.e. ‘linguistic factors’ and ‘language policy factors’. To the former one may reckon, for example, the linguistic relations between the native language and the foreign language(s) to be learned, and to the latter, for example, the fact that one may want to make special arrangements for the language(s) of the neighbouring countries or of the international organisations the country participates in. Under all circumstances, however, the point of departure should be constituted by considerations regarding the (citizens of the) country itself, in the first place the ‘needs’ as defined here. No foreign language should be selected purely ‘for its own sake’. The suggestion is sometimes made that a language should be learned and taught in order to prevent it from dying out. That argument will not motivate learners at all; moreover, the contribution of non-natives to the preservation of a language is likely to be negligible.

Once the policy-decision regarding which language(s) is (are) to be taught in the country has been taken, it still remains to be decided ‘when?’ and ‘to whom?’ these languages should be taught. People, and also policy-makers, have too often tended to focus exclusively on secondary education. A national foreign language teaching policy should encompass all sectors, i.e. both those of the regular school-system –from primary to higher education- and those ‘out-of-school’, whether commercial or non-profit. The needs may be too manifold to be all of them accommodated in secondary education, or they are shared by very specific subsets only of the population. Each sector may have its own specific role to play and, thus, be the best suited to offer a particular language or, also, be the best to teach the required high level skills. In recent decades, i.e. from the mid 1960s, early language learning in primary education has come to be promoted more and more. In many countries special experimental programmes have been launched, with varying success.¹⁴ A wide array of arguments has been

¹⁴ For a recent overview of arguments pro and con and of experiences with ‘early language learning in formal education’, see Johnstone 2000.

put forward in the defence of early learning, most of them educational/organisational. The main argument with many people has, however, always been that the optimum age for beginning the learning of another language lies somewhere before the age of ten: at that age - one contends- the child is still able to learn languages in the effortless, fast and 'natural' way in which children -seem to?- acquire their mother-tongue. Even if, in the meantime, it has become one of the most contested issues and even if research has shown that its universal validity should certainly be relativized, it is again and again brought up as an argument, usually to push the age at which foreign languages are to be introduced yet another year back. Too often -one's impression is- early language learning is used as a panacea for failing foreign language learning in the other sectors, especially secondary education.

The international mobility of people has increased tremendously over the past decades and has, thus, been one of the main causes for the grown need for foreign language learning. In particular, the special requirements of the grown mobility of students and workers, who for longer or shorter periods actually live and work abroad, has brought with it the need for measuring (foreign) language competence -and for quality assurance- across national educational systems and across languages. For example, universities need to know whether students from abroad have the necessary competence in the respective language to be able to successfully follow the instruction in the courses they want to take. Usually diplomas and certificates are not very transparent across national borders and international comparisons are not normally readily available. The Council of Europe has recently made important contributions to bringing the measuring and/or assessment of foreign language competence both across languages and across educational systems within reach. In the context of its languages projects it has developed the so-called Common European Framework (CEF) and the European Language Portfolio (ELP). (see Trim 2000 and Dobson 2000) The main aims of the former are -by making transparent information regarding foreign language competence achieved- to facilitate international co-operation between educational institutions and to provide a basis for mutual recognition of qualifications across countries. To this end the CEF has been made comprehensive, specifying the full range of language competence. (Trim 2000:122) The ELP is set up as a personal document in which learners record, within an internationally recognisable format, their learning experiences. The ELP consists of three parts: a 'passport', recording all the learner's formal qualifications; a 'language biography', describing both the learner's knowledge of particular languages and his learning experiences, such as exchanges and work experience abroad; and, finally, a language dossier, in which samples of work may be included. (Dobson 2000:204)

4. Language learning and teaching strategies

Once a policy-decision has been taken that a particular is to be learned and taught, the actual learning and teaching still has to be given shape. It is at the level of the classroom -assuming we *are* talking of classroom teaching- that the learning of (a piece of) concrete language material, in a way didactically most suited to the individual learners involved, has to take place. A great many questions, relating to both major and minor aspects of the learning/teaching situation, must be answered before an optimal arrangement for successful learning can be set up. The three main didactic questions to tackle, to which all other questions are connected one way or another, are the following: a) what to teach?; b) how to teach?; and, c) how to assess learner achievement? With regard to each of these questions we will discuss a very limited number of points that seem to be of special interest, also in the

light of the previous observations. Although one or two remarks will be made regarding first language teaching (flt), most will bear on second and foreign language teaching (slt).¹⁵

What to teach?

Native or native-like competence is usually very hard to achieve, if at all. For most people – there are exceptions to the rule, of course– such accomplishment is just not possible and, if it is, only at the expense of a great deal of effort. Fortunately, for non-natives to be capable of communicating in the foreign language at an acceptable level that kind of full and maximum competence is not always a requirement. The kind and level of competence required, for one thing, greatly depends on the situation(s) in which the non-native will have to function. We have already spoken of the specific variants of the language that may go with various domains of language use. For some people, too, the foreign language requirement may be limited to the reading skill, to which the offering of many grammar schools used to be restricted. And, also, when oral production is a requirement, a foreign accent not severely hampering intelligibility is usually no problem, unless it raises negative emotional reactions; on the other hand, a foreign accent may also serve as a reminder to the native partner in communication of the non-native's language handicap.

Similarly as in the case of choosing which languages to teach, needs research -i.e. an empirical investigation of the learner's language needs in communicative terms-, when properly conducted¹⁶, is of utmost importance to exactly establish what part(s) of the language(s) in question to teach, and also to what level, when, and in what order. Here too, other factors than those that relate to the subject matter, i.e. the language, come into play and it may well be that regularly their role is greater. Reference is made to psychological and educational factors, relating to the characteristics of the learner, the teacher and the general and specific educational context. They are of particular importance when the day-to-day classroom programme has to be designed. A great many aspects of curriculum and syllabus design could come up for discussion. We restrict ourselves to just two that may have a special educational policy relevance in the present discussions.

First of all, there is not a one-to-one relation between what may be defined as foreign language needs of the learner and what the learner should be made to learn in the classroom. There are three circumstances to be taken into consideration on the way from needs to course content. In the first place, what competence the learner already possesses, does not have to be

¹⁵ There is no room to go into the differences that the specific circumstances of 'second' and 'foreign' language teaching, as defined by us above, occasionally lead to in didactic terms. As a matter of fact, for the present comments it is 'foreign' language teaching that has actually provided the context rather than 'second' language teaching.

¹⁶ There are levels of insight into communicative needs to be discerned. There used to be a time that people only spoke of 'knowing the foreign language', only distinguishing levels in such general and vague denominators as 'elementary', 'intermediate' and 'advanced' and at times not even specifying 'receptive' or 'productive' and 'oral' or 'written' skills. The insight that language use is very much situationally determined has enabled linguists to be much more specific about the definition of learners' needs. In principle it is possible to give a detailed analysis of the language variant required, once one knows about the situations the learner will have to use the foreign language in, about the partners in communication in those situations, about the communicative roles that the learner will have to play, about the required communication strategies, etc.. There are also different levels of 'depth' to which research may probe the foreign language needs. Most of the work executed in the context of the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project cannot be looked upon as truly empirically based, being developed mainly from the writers' own intuitions regarding prospective learners' foreign language use. Usually, in research, opinions, expectations, experiences of people concerned are gathered, in particular via questionnaires. The largest and most comprehensive investigations of this category were conducted in The Netherlands in the late 1970s, early 1980s. (see Van Els et al. 1984:166ff.) So far, the third category that can be distinguished, in which relevant samples of actual foreign language use are gathered and analysed, has yielded no instances.

learned again; and, similarly, previous learning experience of other foreign languages may facilitate the learning of the new language. In the second place, part of the learning the learner will be able to do outside the classroom, if the foreign language is also available in the learner's out of school surroundings; this is, as we have seen, one of the most characteristic differences between 'second' and 'foreign' language learning and teaching, but there are also –so to speak- traces of it in what we would normally look upon as a 'foreign' language setting. In The Netherlands, for example, the presence of English in society has increased tremendously over the past decades, so much so that it has been suggested to consider diminishing the share that English teaching has had so far in Dutch secondary schools. The third point is that learning does not come to an end after the learner has left school. As with many other qualifications, placing the 'finishing touch' can often be left to later when practical experience is being built up.

In the second place, we have already seen that the foreign language needs pattern of learners does not invariably have to include all four oral/written and productive/receptive (sub-)skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. In the same way, the levels of competence to be achieved for each of these skills do not have to match: it is not unusual for learners to need a high level of competence in reading in combination with just very little speaking skill. Of late, the desirability of formally dropping one or more (sub-)skills from the school curriculum of a foreign language has come under consideration again. Especially in countries where slt claims large proportions of the available curricular time, it is hoped that in that way room can be made for (parts of) other languages that are also in high demand. Such limited programmes are often referred to as 'partial competences'. Actually, in the latest curricular revision of general secondary education in The Netherlands French and German have –again- been made into obligatory final examination subjects, which they had been until the school reform of the late 1960s. The obligation-for-all, however, only concerns the reading skill, for which the universities had expressed an marked preference. The introduction of the partial competences has not been without problems, however, and the call from among teachers to abandon the model altogether seems to have been becoming louder and louder in recent years. A misconception that surrounds the notion of partial competences, may also well be one of the major causes of the present discontent among Dutch teachers. Sometimes people -teachers and pupils alike- think that what is defined as the final objective of the programme –in this case, the reading skill- should also fully determine the course content. They are convinced that the reading skill can only be acquired through the learning and the teaching of reading and that, therefore, -to their dismay and utter disgust- there is no place in the classroom for any (trace of the) other skills. That this is a didactic misconception may, *mutatis mutandis*, be read in the following discussion of the learning of explicitly formulated language rules.¹⁷

How to teach?

The major concern in classrooms is to find ways to make the learners achieve the desired level of competence in the foreign language. There may be other objectives, such as instilling an understanding of the culture of the country and, as part of that, of the related literature, but the primary interest lies in the acquisition of a command of the language. In flt an insight into and an ability to apply explicit knowledge of the rule-system of the mother-tongue is usually part of the objective. On the other hand, rule-learning leading to an understanding of the structural make-up of the foreign language is normally not a part of the slt-objectives. But, also in the days that the learning of explicitly formulated rules of the new language formed

¹⁷ A recent survey of foreign language teaching in schools of the member-states of the EU and of some 15 other European countries, either associated with the EU or negotiating their entrance, is to be found in EURYDICE 2001. The focus of the study is on primary and lower and upper general secondary education.

part of the objective, rule-learning very often was not a goal in itself, but served the other didactic purpose of supporting and contributing to the acquisition of the command of the language in question. Now that rule-learning is not an end in itself anymore, when it occurs, it occurs as a didactic tool in the learning process. Its role as such is very much a moot point, which it probably always has been except in the days of the traditional grammar-translation method, when the teaching of (modern) languages was very much modelled on the teaching of the classical languages. The tool of making learners learn –usually by heart- explicitly formulated rules of the foreign language has come under serious criticism from many, because –it is said- for high-level command of both first and second languages ‘knowledge’ of rules is only required in the sense of a full and fully automatized control of the underlying rule-system, and, moreover, mastery of rules in first language competence comes about in a very ‘natural’ way, it seems, without any interference on the basis of explicitly formulated rules. However, in general it is a didactic misconception to think that the specific characteristics of the objective, in this case of language competence, should either be represented in or fully prescribe the teaching content *and* that nothing else should. Furthermore, it is a misconception also to think that what is –seems to be?- the ‘natural’ way to acquire automatic command of the rule-system of the first language, should *because of that* also be the way to gain automatic control of the foreign language rule-system: what is ‘unnatural’ about learning explicitly formulated rules anyway? In slt-discussions the opposing theories of the so-called ‘grammar-translation’ method and of the ‘direct’/‘natural’ method have always had both their supporters and their opponents. So much is clear by now, neither theory can claim to be universally valid for all learners, under all circumstances. This leads to the following point.

In classroom-slt there are three major categories of variables at work that each individually and in interaction with each other determine what is the optimal didactic arrangement for each specific situation. The variables cluster around the learner, the teacher and the subject matter, i.e. the language competence in question. There is no classroom setting like any other classroom setting, which means that there is a great deal of variation in what one calls ‘best practice’. Learners of different ages are differently motivated, they approach their learning tasks differently, they bring with them different learning careers, i.e. they may have developed different approaches to –and preferences for- tackling learning problems. Teachers may vary as to their own foreign language competence and/or familiarity with its actual usage, they may have been brought up in different learning/teaching traditions, they vary in personality and in their approach to pupils. And, finally, language competence has different features depending on different skills and different levels: oral skills definitely presuppose other learning/teaching procedures than written skills and the training of advanced levels requires other approaches than that of elementary language competence.¹⁸

With all this variation, however, some principles of ‘best practice’ seem to have established themselves by and large. As a rule, skill acquisition requires actual practice; there may, of course, be exceptions to the rule and, moreover, it is hard to say in each specific case how much of it is required, how much repetition should be planned, etc.; what seems to be certain, however, is that in actual practice generally not the avoidance of mistakes, or, *vice versa*, the correctness of utterance should be the major worry, but the attempt at foreign language communication. Also, the learners should be presented with, i.e. immersed in, lots of authentic material, with the proviso that discussion may arise as to how much material there should be and how close to authenticity one would want to have it. Finally, as in other

¹⁸ Not surprisingly, the Reader by Tucker & Corson 1997, which is devoted completely to slt, has separate chapters on such themes as ‘individual differences’, ‘age’, ‘school-aged learners’, ‘exceptional learners’ and ‘adults’.

learning tasks, slt should at all times be challenging to the learners; the demands put on the learners should tax them to the utmost, but –on the other hand- they should never overtax them, because of the demotivating effect that that would have. There is a plethora of research to show that the ‘best practice’ that fits all slt-settings is just not available.

How to assess learner achievements?

In slt-classrooms one works towards well-defined goals, assuming the curriculum and syllabus have been properly designed. At the end of the course, both the learner and the teacher will be interested to know whether and/or in how far the goals have been reached. During the course they will also want to know whether sufficient progress is being made towards achieving the goals, so that timely corrections, if needed, can be made. Although the contexts and the targets of both types –the former is called ‘summative’, the latter ‘formative’- differ widely in some respects, they also have some fundamental features in common. All tests, as measurements, must be a) *reliable*, i.e. produce consistent scores; b) *valid*, i.e. measure just that what they set out to measure; and c) *efficient*, i.e. capable of being used in the contexts for which they were intended.¹⁹ SLT-testing has for a very long time now drawn a great deal of attention, especially the topics of certification and final examinations. There is a vast literature on testing. More and more, with the growing interest in communicative competence as the main objective of foreign language teaching programmes, the special problems of testing the learners’ capacity to actually perform certain kinds of authentic communication tasks have been the central issues in the development of slt-testing theory. (Kelly 1999:691) Especially in this respect, an old dilemma has become acutely prominent again. For tests to be valid –and reliable- they do not have to represent and/or require the demonstration of genuinely communicative behaviour. Tests in the well-known multiple-choice format, which are efficient almost by definition and which are also unproblematic from a point of view of reliability –if, that is, they are designed in an expert way-, do not normally ask for genuine skill performance, whereas in their results they can be shown to be undoubtedly representative of communicative competence. The major objection against their being used for certification and final examination purposes lies, however, in the backlash effect they may have on learner behaviour and classroom practices. It is very common for people concerned to use the tests that have served for certification and final examination purposes, as training material to prepare for their own examination. In that way, they cease to train for progress in communicative competence, but train basically only the handling of the test format itself. Assessment matters need to be treated with great care, especially in cases where the teachers are not adequately schooled or well-informed in didactic theory.

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¹⁹ See Kelly 1999:689; the respective Reader, i.e. Spolsky 1999, offers another eight short monographs, which together provide a clear statement of the state of the art in slt-testing.

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