



Laidlaw Research and Leadership Programme

Laidlaw Report

Main Project Title: The Political Effects of Foreign Language Education Policies in Europe

Scholar Project: Structure and Reforms of Foreign Language Education in Europe

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Does foreign language learning affect political behaviour and attitudes? By assuming that foreign languages foster openness, cultural awareness, and a “plurilingual identity” (Byram 2008), the summer project I worked on focused precisely on analysing the correlation and causality between foreign language learning and European identity. More specifically, my input consisted in evaluating structures and reforms of foreign language education in Europe to understand the background of different European countries. The project was mainly divided in three parts, each focusing on a specific area and requiring a different outcome: a literature review, a cross-national study, and three country reports. First of all, I started the project by getting acquainted with my supervisor’s past papers on the subject and by looking at the broader spectrum of foreign language and European identity literature. I, then, analysed cross-national reports, graphs, and timelines on foreign language education in Europe. Finally, based on the foreign languages that I speak, I prepared in-depth country reports on Italy, France, and Poland.

The literature review

The research component started with a general familiarisation of the project whereby I read my supervisor’s first papers. These argued that foreign language teaching, or the lack thereof, was among the factors that led to the unfavourable view of the European Union, hence to Brexit, in the UK. This analysis is now extended to a number of other European countries. With this idea in mind, my first task consisted in looking at the existing literature on foreign languages and identity. I tackled this component of the research project by exploring multiple libraries, such as UCL Explore and Google Scholar, to gather existing pieces of literature on foreign languages, European identity, and European citizenship. I was able to approach papers belonging to several disciplines – even ones I had not encountered before – including political science, sociology, education, and psychology. The outcome of

this first part of the project consisted in a catalogue of existing literature as well as a 1000-word literature review. The review outlined relevant phases of foreign language education in Europe such as the 1995 White Paper and the 2002 European Council meeting in Barcelona, which advanced the “mother tongue + two” formula (Hennebry 2011). I also looked at the correlation between foreign language learning and European identity as well as European citizenship. In the former, I observed the process of socialisation and identity-building, and how these interact with foreign languages. In the latter, I took this correlation a step further from the concept of identity as foreign languages are often associated with increased participation in European democratic processes, therefore active citizenship.

The cross-national study

In the second week, the research involved collecting key cross-national data and country reports. Here, I mostly relied on websites such as Eurydice, Eurostat, Erasmus+, and UNESCO to identify data and graphs on the evolving foreign language landscape in Europe. A challenging aspect of this component was collecting relevant historical data as most of it was quite recent. In fact, the project heavily relies on data from the 80s, 90s and early 00s because it looks at the progress of foreign languages, their transformation, and finally how they affect political behaviour. Some of the factors I had to look for were the age at which both the first and the second foreign language were introduced, the number of languages taught, the instruction time for each language, and how these elements changed over time. Based on the collected data, Italy was the first obvious choice considering that it had a drastic change in the age at which the first foreign language was introduced: 11 between 1974 and 1984, 8 between 1984 and 1994, 7 between 1994 and 2003. A smaller, yet relevant, change occurred in France in the early 00s and Poland in 2003.

The country reports

The third part of the project mainly focused on analysing Italy as well as France and Poland. The outcome of this part was a 2,200-word report on Italy and a graphic timeline of its foreign language reforms from the 60s to 2009. In addition to that, I also completed two short reports of approximately 700 words each on Poland and France. Each report was accompanied by referencing, bibliographies, graphs, and a general description of the educational structure of the country in question. These reports focused on analysing the age at which the first and the second foreign language were introduced, for how long they were taught, what their instruction time was, and how teachers were trained. More specifically, the reports outline the reforms, laws, and decrees that established such changes and monitor this transformation over a period of three decades, or five in the case of Italy. Furthermore, through the report and the data I gathered, I sought to understand which cohort was affected by different reforms.

1. Italy

As far as Italy is concerned, I gave a brief overview of its foreign language background in the 60s and 70s as well as a glance through its experimental phases and language projects, demonstrating how these were extremely relevant for two future reforms: the 1985 one and the 2003 one. The former comprised a reform of education programmes in 1985, a law in 1990, and a legislative decree in 1991 which introduced foreign languages in the school curriculum from the second year of elementary school (third year in the transition period) when pupils are roughly seven years old. By contrast, with the 2003 reform, English was to be taught since the first year of primary school when pupils are roughly six years old. The reform also introduced the teaching of a second foreign language in lower secondary school since the age of 11 in the 2006-7 school year.

2. France

France's language policy experienced multiple changes and reforms since 2002, leading to the promotion of plurilingualism nationally. As schools were undergoing programme reforms, foreign languages became fully part of the school curriculum from the start of the 2002-3 school year when one foreign language was introduced at the age of eight in the third year of primary school (CE2) for the entire third cycle (pupils aged 8-11). Since 1998, the second foreign language has been introduced in *quatrième* at the age of 13 (third year of lower secondary school) with an instruction time of three hours per week. More specifically, general upper secondary school pupils have to learn two foreign languages since the 2000-1 school year. By contrast, while being strongly advised to, pupils in technological and vocational upper secondary schools (with the exception of tertiary science and technology schools) only have to learn one foreign language, with the second one being optional.

3. Poland

Foreign language learning has also become a priority in Poland since the country's integration with the EU. Foreign languages are either taught as compulsory or as optional subjects depending on the grade and the nature of the school. From the 2002-3 school year, the first foreign language was introduced at the age of 10 (fourth year of primary school) as opposed to the pre-reform period of 11. This further changed in the following years with the first foreign language being introduced at the age of 7 (first year of primary school) in the 2008-9 school year and, later, in pre-primary years in 2014. Moreover, since the 2002-3 school year, the second language became a mandatory or optional part of the school curriculum from the age of 16 to that of 19. In a later stage, this was reformed and a second foreign language became mandatory at the age of 13 (first year of lower secondary school) in the 2010-11 school year.

The skills I gained

During the summer project, I both gained new skills and further developed existing ones. I worked on and improved my writing and summary skills, by collecting key data and literature as well as compiling a literature review. Throughout the whole research

component, I heavily relied on a number of different sources ranging from reports to laws and decrees, which I had not approached from an academic point of view before. In fact, on the one hand, I analysed papers in political science, sociology, education, and psychology characterised by different structures and aims. On the other hand, I gathered data from cross-national and country reports, laws, and decrees in different languages. In addition to getting acquainted with documents of different nature, I learned how to filter papers through Google Scholar, by using keywords, time frames, and symbols. This enabled me to navigate the broad literature on foreign languages and access specifically papers relevant to the project in terms of both content and dates. In fact, one of the main challenges I faced throughout the project was spotting reforms from the 80s, 90s, and early 00s as most countries (e.g., Ministry of Education website) and cross-national (e.g., Eurydice and UNESCO) sources focus on recent reforms. Consequently, through this kind of work and procedure I developed stronger analytical skills.

Citing and referencing also played a major part in my skill development as I referenced a wide range of sources from journal articles to reports to laws in different languages. Indeed, I also grew more familiar with the Zotero tool to collect, organise, and save all the sources I used.

Moreover, the project enabled me to acquire knowledge not only in what seems a niche area of expertise but also to get a broader perspective on the foreign language background in Europe and identity-shaping, both of which combine multiple disciplines and relate to different personal experiences. In fact, I also improved my foreign language and translation skills in Italian, French, Polish, and English.

As a whole, the project taught me how to select key data and information, summarise it, and present it in the form of a report and a literature review while getting an introduction to research design and methods, which will be useful for the upcoming years. Indeed, all these skills will be extremely helpful and relevant for my essays and dissertation as well as potential postgraduate studies.