

Why Applied Linguistics is not Enough. Contemporary early foreign language learning policy in Europe: a critical analysis

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This paper questions why research in applied linguistics appears to have substantially failed to influence the growth of state policies for early foreign language learning across Europe. It proposes that a bottom-up process of societal pressure appears to have found a willing partner in the form of a top-down initiative for covert subsidiarity operating at a European level to promote the increasingly earlier start of foreign language learning (ELL) in state school systems across the nation states of the European Union (EU). In this process, the voices of applied linguists have held little sway.

This shift is strongly supported by a series of EU publications prioritising the importance of an early start, summarised by the EU Report on the Action Plan 2004-06 (European Communities, 2007, p9) which confirmed that, increasingly, “the trend is to start a second language (whether a foreign or minority language or a language with co-official status) earlier, generally in the first three years of primary education”, although there is some evidence of continuing movement towards an even earlier start (Enever, 2008, p30). In this response, we can identify the EU adopting a role whereby, as Borg & Mayo (2005, p207) have described, it has become “the one supranational organisation [globally] that has the power to influence the educational policies of sovereign states”. Such evidence suggests a move away from the concept of subsidiarity, a principle that acknowledges the autonomy of each EU nation state over its national language policy in education.

Research in the field of early language learning has been somewhat contradictory on the potential benefits of an early start, in schooled learning contexts. A recent substantial review of relevant research (Edelenbos *et al*, 2006, p147) noted that: “An early start by itself [...] guarantees nothing; it needs to be accompanied minimally by good teaching, by a supportive environment and by continuity from one year to the next...” This review reflects emerging evidence from an on-going longitudinal study of ELL in state schools across seven European countries (ELLiE 2007-

2010) which is already revealing the difficulties of maintaining continuity of quality in some contexts. The following summary briefly pinpoints some early indicators.

An initial analysis of policy in the seven ELLiE study countries from the perspective of cross-cutting themes (Spolsky 2004, p15) suggests evidence of supranational influences in the choice of a start age of 6-8 years for all seven study contexts. Further evidence of uniformity appears in policy documentation which strongly reflects the descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), with the noted exception of Croatia (currently an EU applicant country). This finding is particularly surprising considering that CEFR descriptors were formulated on a base of the language use of young adults (Fulcher, 2008)

Johnstone (forthcoming) critiques use of the CEFR noting that “the assumed linearity of such scales does not equate to how learners actually learn language”, further reporting that children’s progress in ELL, “...is not akin to climbing a ladder” (p9). In identifying this cross-cutting theme as evidence of supranational policy impact, within a climate of global forces at work it appears that in six of the seven countries studied a priority has been what Grin (2002) describes as “external efficiency” related to economic issues whilst ignoring evidence of non-linearity in ELL. Croatia has proved to be a noteworthy exception to this pattern.

Similarly, the choice of first FL in the seven study contexts also appears related to language economy. With the obvious exception of England, English is overwhelmingly the first choice. This reflects published data (Eurydice network, 2008) which reports English to be the first choice of 90% of EU language learners in schools.

Evidence from the ELLiE study (ELLiE 2008) on teacher qualifications and national frameworks for teacher development reveals a substantially more mixed pattern. Whilst all countries appear to value a model whereby the class teacher teaches the full curriculum, including the FL, only three of the study contexts fully reflect this pattern (Sweden, Netherlands, Spain). The remaining four contexts (England, Poland, Croatia, Italy) vary in their provision of both generalist and specialist FL teachers according to local availability. Whilst some evidence of supranational policy may be identified here, both national histories of pedagogy and the high economic costs may limit

potential for implementation and sustainability over time.

The research briefly summarised here indicates the importance of adopting a multidisciplinary approach to the study of ELL policy, not relying only on applied linguistics, but also drawing on the fields of education, social policy and economics.

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