ADDRESSING 'THE AGE FACTOR': SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGES POLICY

Guide for the development of Language Education Policies in Europe
From Linguistic Diversity to Plurilingual Education

Reference Study

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Preface

This text, part of a series published by the *Language Policy Division*, is clearly significant in its own right because it deals with certain influential factors in the organisation and sociolinguistic foundations of language teaching and in the linguistic ideologies at work in problems related to the languages of Europe. It is however part of a larger project since it is one element of a collection of publications focused on the *Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe. From Linguistic Diversity to Plurilingual Education*.

This *Guide* is both a descriptive and programmatic document whose purpose is to demonstrate the complexity of the questions involved in language teaching, often dealt with in a simplistic manner. It aims to describe the processes and conceptual tools needed for the analysis of educational contexts with respect to languages and for the organisation of language learning and teaching according to the principles of the Council of Europe.

There are several versions of this *Guide* for different audiences, but the 'main version' deals with a number of complex questions, albeit in a limited framework. It seemed necessary to illustrate these questions with case studies, syntheses and studies of specific sectors of language teaching, dealing in monographic form with questions only touched upon in the *Guide*. These *Reference Studies* provide a context for the *Guide*, showing its theoretical bases, sources of further information, areas of research and the themes which underlie it.

The *Modern Languages Division*, now the *Language Policy Division*, demonstrates through this collection of publications its new phase of activity, which is a continuation of previous activities. The *Division* disseminated through the *Threshold Levels* of the 1970s, a language teaching methodology more focused upon communication and mobility within Europe. It then developed on the basis of a shared educational culture, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (published in its final version in 2001). This is a document which is not concerned with the nature of the contents of language teaching but rather with the form of curricula and syllabi for language teaching. The *Framework* proposes explicit referential levels for identifying degrees of language competence, and thus provides the basis for differentiated management of courses so that opportunities for the teaching of more languages in schools and in lifelong learning are created. This recognition of the intrinsic value of plurilingualism has simultaneously led to the development of an instrument which allows each learner to become aware of and to describe their language repertoire, namely the *European Language Portfolio*. Versions of this are increasingly being developed in member States and were at the heart of the European Year of Languages (2001).

Plurilingualism has been identified in numerous *Recommendations* of the Council of Europe as the principle and the aim of language education policies, and must be valued at the individual level as well as being accepted collectively by educational institutions. The *Guide* and the *Reference Studies* provide the link between teaching methods and educational issues on the one hand and policy on the other, and have the function of making explicit this political principle and of describing concrete measures for implementation.

This text by Richard Johnstone deals with one of the factors which most often face policy makers: the apparently obvious 'fact' that early language learning is best. Parents and other laypeople see young children apparently learning quickly and with little effort and compare this with their own and other people's efforts at secondary school, which seemed to be rewarded with minimal ability to speak a foreign language fluently. Johnstone discusses the scientific evidence for and against this frequent observation and points out that the issues are far from simple. He shows for example that differences between naturalistic and instructed contexts must be taken into account, as must the advantages and disadvantages of learning at different ages. He also points out that contextual factors are crucial and provides a summary of factors in society and in the provision made in the implementation of policy which will be helpful to those who decide policy.

This specific aspect of the problems of language education policies in Europe gives a perspective on the general view taken in the *Guide* but nonetheless this text is a part of the fundamental project of the *Language Policy Division*: to create through reflection and exchange of experience and expertise, the consensus necessary for European societies, characterised by their differences and the transcultural currents which create 'globalised nations', not to become lost in the search for the 'perfect' language or languages valued at the expense of others. They should rather recognise the plurality of the languages of Europe and the plurilingualism, actual or potential, of all those who live in this space, as a condition for collective creativity and for development, a component of democratic citizenship through linguistic tolerance, and therefore as a fundamental value of their actions in languages and language teaching.

Jean-Claude Beacco and Michael Byram

1. Introduction

The question 'When to start?' has been of concern to languages policy-makers for many years. Will there be real gains if children begin at (say) age five or six (or even earlier) as opposed to (say) nine or ten? Is there an age after which it becomes increasingly difficult to learn another language?

At present the context for early language learning varies so much from one part of Europe to another (c.f. the survey conducted by Blondin *et al*, 1998) that it is impossible to provide answers to these questions which would apply equally across the full and diverse range of states associated with the Council of Europe. Instead of trying to provide generalisable answers then, I shall seek to provide a discussion of key issues, based as far as possible on published evidence, on which policy-makers might draw as they develop their own policies for their own specific national and local contexts.

2. What is the best age at which to start?

2.1 The 'critical period hypothesis' (CPH) in learning an additional language

Experts agree there is a 'critical period' for developing one's first language, in that if this has not occurred by roughly the onset of puberty, it is highly unlikely to occur. There has however been extensive debate concerning the existence and possible scope of a 'critical period' for subsequent languages.

There is little doubt that in society at large many people feel intuitively that young children possess some inherent advantage in learning languages, and so there is a widespread view that 'the younger = the better.' 'Young children are far less inhibited and far more open and receptive; they seem to soak their foreign language up, like a sponge' is the sort of expression one often hears.

There are several different definitions of the CPH in relation to second or subsequent languages, but common to most of them is the assumption that after the onset of puberty it will be impossible for the learner to acquire native speaker levels of competence, particularly in pronunciation and intonation.

Underlying the CPH is a biological view of second language development, based on the claims of Penfield and Roberts (1959) and further developed by Lenneberg (1967). This view assumes that as young children grow older changes take place in the brain which thereafter make it impossible for languages to be acquired instinctively as occurs in the initial years. Modern techniques of magnetic imaging do indeed indicate that when language is being processed, young children differ from

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adolescents in the parts of the brain which appear to be activated. The assumption is that young children are born with a special intuitive capacity for language which enables them to acquire their first language - or first languages (in the case of bi- and plurilingual children) -, but with puberty this innate capacity begins to atrophy. It is as though it were the first stage of a rocket which projects the vessel into outer space but then burns out because its job is done, and other built-in, more cognitive systems located elsewhere in the brain take over.

In the past two years a number of important reviews of the research literature on the CPH and second languages have been published. Scovel's (2000) review indicates that during the 1980s expert opinion swung away from the CPH. It was influenced no doubt by a number of negative evaluations of early language learning at school (e.g. Burstall *et al*, 1974) which indicated that the initial gains from making an early start at prima ry school had largely evaporated within a few years at secondary school. In recent years however opinion has begun to swing back again. Initially the CPH focused mainly on speech (native-like accent) but in recent years has been extended to embrace other aspects of language competence such as grammar (particularly morphology and syntax), opening up the possibility that there may not be one 'critical period' which applies at the one time 'across the board' but that different aspects of language competence may go through different periods which are particularly sensitive for their development. For an authoritative and detailed discussion, see Singleton & Lengyel (1995).

Marinova-Todd *et al* 's (2000) review, on the other hand, is more sceptical about the CPH, pointing to thirty-five fairly recent studies, of which fourteen seemed to offer some support for the CPH, with twenty-one providing negative evidence. Several of these studies, they claim, show that learners post-puberty are in fact capable of achieving native-like competence. In particular they claim that those favouring the CPH have committed three fallacies: misinterpretation, misattribution and misemphasis [1].

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[1] Marinova-Todd, Marshall and Snow (2000) accept that generally adults achieve lower levels of proficiency than younger learners do, but they attribute this to contextual rather than to biological factors. They claim that those favouring the CPH fall victim to three fallacies: 'The first fallacy is misinterpretation of observations of child and adult learners, which might suggest that children are fast and efficient at picking up second languages. Hard data make it clear that children learn new languages slowly and effortfully - in fact, with less speed and more effort than adolescents or adults. The second fallacy is misattribution of conclusions about language proficiency to facts about the brain; connections between brain functioning and language behaviour will no doubt in time be confirmed, but their exact nature cannot even be guessed from the data currently available on brain functions in early versus late bilinguals. Finally, the common fallacy of reasoning from frequent failure to the impossibility of success has dogged second language research. Most adult second language learners do, in fact, end up with lower-than-native-like levels of proficiency. But most adult learners fail to engage in the task with sufficient motivation, commitment of time or energy, and support from the environments in which they find themselves to expect thigh levels of success. …… this

2.2   CPH in relation to native-like accent

A number of recent studies, e.g. Bongerts *et al* (1997), Nikolov (2000a), Bellingham (2000), and Neufeld (2001) all suggest that adults are in fact capable of attaining a native-like accent, which runs counter to the CPH. Nikolov's study featured thirty-three successful language learners aged 20 to 70, all of whom had acquired their target language after puberty. Of these, twenty were of different first languages learning Hungarian and thirteen were of Hungarian as first language learning English. She found that, as judged by three groups of native speakers, six of the learners of Hungarian and five of the learners of English were either generally or often mistaken for native speakers, and she concludes that this calls any strong version of the CPH into question. Her survey showed that 'these successful language learners want to sound like natives, they share intrinsic motivation in the target language which is often part of their profession, or they are integratively motivated. … They work on the development of their language proficiency consciously and actively through finding chances for communicating with speakers of the target language, reading and listening extensively …' (p. 122).

2.3   CPH in relation to morphology and syntax

Scovel (2000) asks: Is there a CPH for morphosyntactic competence? Those who believe there is tend to assume that the intuitive capacity for language which young children possess contains its own innate and highly abstract grammar, one which is universal and underlies all human language. When young children interact with parents and others and are exposed to language, this built-in grammar - sometimes called Universal Grammar (UG) - 'tunes itself in' to the grammar of the particular language to which it is exposed. This process of 'tuning in' is not conscious or deliberate and allows children to acquire the grammar of their first language(s) intuitively by natural means.

Lakshmanan (1995) indicates that much of the UG-based research in the 1980s focused on adults but there is a greater interest now in children. The overall picture emerging from recent studies is that children's second-language grammar system, as it develops over time, is indeed influenced by UG, though it is not yet clear whether the influence is direct or indirect. This does not mean however that second-language and first-language acquisition are identical, since from childhood on the existence of a first language inevitably has some influence on the development of subsequent languages, and some experts consider that even in childhood more general cognitive processes may be taking over from UG.

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misemphasis has distracted researchers from focusing on the truly informative cases: successful adults who invest sufficient time and attention in second language acquisition and who benefit from high motivation and from supportive, informative second language environments. ' (p. 28/29).

Singleton (2001) indeed is cautious about the idea that children and adults may process language in completely different ways. 'There has been a continuation of research into the question of whether or not UG continues to be available as a support for language learning beyond childhood. There is no strong evidence that post-pubertal second language learners do not have available to them the capacities which Chomskyans think of as deriving from UG ' (p. 81).

Overall then it is probably true that, given suitable input, interaction and emotional support, young children can acquire an additional language by processes that, at least in part, are intuitive, but it is not clear that this intuitive capacity disintegrates with puberty. It is possible though not certain that older learners may still be able to draw on it.

2.4 Interpreting the evidence

2.4.1 Age is not alone

Bellingham (2000) rightly claims that age is not a stand-alone factor influencing second language acquisition but merely one of a cluster of contextual and developmental factors that may make acquisition more difficult for mature learners. In a study of over 60,000 subjects, Bialystok and Hakuta (1999) similarly 'claim that maturational factors and education continually intervene in ultimate second language acquisition success, and so it is misleading to invoke biological explanations such as the CPH for limitations that appear in older second language learners' (p. 219). Policy-makers and teachers are never confronted by the age factor on its own. They have to confront large clusters of factors (including 'age'), few of which can be scientifically 'controlled'.

2.4.2 Younger = Better in the long run

A number of propositions can be made in relation to the CPH. One is that it is invalid and that in fact it is more true to claim that 'older = better'. Three others are more favourable to the CPH but in different ways. The first of these makes the strong claim that 'younger = better'; the second claims that 'younger = better' in some areas (e.g. pronunciation; morphology and syntax); while the third claims that 'younger = better in the long run, under certain circumstances'. My view concurs with that of Singleton (1989) which rejects the first of these three claims, allows for the second and most strongly favours the third: 'Concerning the hypothesis that those who begin learning a second language in childhood in the long run generally achieve a higher level of proficiency than those who begin later in life, one can say that there is some good supportive evidence and that there is no actual counter-evidence' (Singleton, 1989: 137).

2.4.3 Difference between 'naturalistic' and 'instructed' contexts

Singleton (2000) concludes that in naturalistic settings of second language acquisition there is 'evidence of more rapid initial learning on the part of adult and adolescent subjects, but also of younger beginners catching up with and beginning to

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overtake older beginners after about 12 months of exposure' (p.22). An example of a 'naturalistic setting' might be when a family with their children move to another country where another language is spoken, and where the children acquire the new language though daily interactions with new friends, at school etc. In the much more typical instructional settings on the other hand, where the family does not move abroad but instead the child makes an early start on a foreign language at school, this 'catching up' process takes much longer and will not automatically occur. Singleton indicates for example that there is a 'consistent finding that learners exposed to a second language at primary and who then at secondary level are mixed in with later beginners do not maintain an advantage for more than a modest period over these latter' (p. 22).

2.4.4   Be cautious. Ensure that key conditions are fulfilled

Scovel (2000)) concludes: 'It should be obvious that, given the conflicting evidence and contrasting viewpoints that still exist, parents, educational institutions, or ministries of education should be exceedingly cautious about translating what they read about the CPH research into personal practice or public policy' (p. 220). Djigunovich and Vilke (2000) conclude on the basis of their project with children in Croatia beginning at age 6 that this was a good age at which to start, provided that certain key conditions were fulfilled. These included intensive interaction in class, amounting to 45 minutes per day for five days per week, class size of 10-15 for languages, and teachers who possessed a fluent command of the language and a good pronunciation and intonation. These are intended here only as examples of key conditions for one context and not a full list of key conditions for all contexts. Nikolov (2000b: 43) goes so far as to claim that 'if any of the requirements are missing, second language instruction should not begin at an early age; a negative experience may harm children's attitude to the target language and to language learning in general.'

2.4.5   Each age brings its own advantages and disadvantages

Stern (1976) concludes that 'we must avoid the danger of creating a false dichotomy between Penfield and the theory of early language learning, and Burstall and the theory of later language learning, and of having to make a clear choice between them. On developmental grounds, each age in life probably has its peculiar advantages and disadvantages for language learning …… In the sixties the mistake was made of expecting miracles merely by starting young. The miracles have not come about. Starting late is not the answer either'.

The remainder of this paper considers further the key conditions for successful language learning in younger and older learners and explores Stern's thought that different ages might bring different advantages and disadvantages to language learners.

3. Some characteristics of younger and older learners

There is of course no such thing as '*the*' younger learner or '*the*' older learner, since there are many stages in the life-long process between 'young' and 'old', at any of which there is considerable variation among individuals. Nonetheless, I shall offer a few thoughts about the general characteristics of learners who are towards the younger end and of others who are towards the older end of the age spectrum.

3.1   Towards the younger end

Djigunovich and Vilke (2000), suggest that young children need to develop a strong emotional attachment to their teacher. Their education, including their language education, is a process to which they should be encouraged to contribute physically, emotionally and intellectually. Because of their limited attention span, they need variety of activity. At this age many children are shy and they should join in classroom activities when they feel ready rather than when the teacher demands.

In an earlier study Djiugunovich (1995) found that the same children's attitudes to languages developed considerably from age 6 to 9. When aged six their positive attitudes to learning English derived mainly from their enjoyment of classroom language-games, but by age nine they were perceiving their classroom activities as 'learning' rather than as 'playing' and their still positive attitudes were linked to this new perception. In other words, they had developed an explicit concept of themselves as languages learners and were taking pleasure from this.

Observers in early language learning classrooms frequently report that the children seem highly motivated. To begin with, the motivation seems associated with pleasurable activities and then assumes a more intrinsic form as it is associated with the pleasure of learning and with cognitive challenge. In her research on early language learners Nikolov (1999) found instances of intrinsic motivation but few if any instances of two other well-known types of motivational orientation: instrumental (e.g. motivated to learn a language in order to gain a good job or to have an impressive CV) and integrative (e.g. motivated to learn a language in order to become more closely involved with its speakers and their cultures). It would appear then that instrumental and integrative forms of motivation, unlike intrinsic motivation, may not be strongly present in young learners but that they become more salient as learners progress through adolescence and form clearer views as to their particular needs and interests.

Our own research in Scotland (Low *et al*, 1995) suggested there were differences between 8-year-old and 11-year-old foreign language learners in respect of anxiety. Part of the national evaluation research was concerned with the extent to which learners of these two ages were able to represent particular strategies consciously to themselves. The 8-year-olds offered no instances of strategies for handling anxiety, whereas the 11-year-olds offered a number of such strategies, e.g. 'If you don't understand, don't worry too much. Ask the teacher.' It is conceivable that both groups

were equally 'language anxious', but that the 11-year-olds were able to express this whereas the younger ones were not. The more likely interpretation however, is that the younger group were not experiencing 'language anxiety' whereas the older ones were beginning to do so, but to their credit were willing to express this and to suggest their own strategies for dealing with it.

Given appropriate teaching and conditions for learning, younger learners may possess the following advantages over older beginners in learning an additional language:

- they are likely to find it easier to acquire a good command of the sound system of the language, not only the pronunciation of individual sounds but also patterns of intonation;

- they are likely to be less 'language anxious' than many older learners and hence may be more able to absorb language rather than block it out;

- they are likely to have more time available overall. If young beginners at age 5 are compared with older beginners at age 10 then after one year the older group are likely to be ahead. However, if both groups are compared at (say) age 14, then the younger beginners stand a better chance of being ahead, in part because of the greater amount of time available overall;

- an earlier start enables productive links to be made between first and additional languages, which can have important benefits for a child's language awareness and literacy;

- a range of acquisitional processes cam come into play, e.g. largely intuitive processes at an early age, complemented by more analytical processes later. This potentially allows the additional language to become more deeply embedded in the person;

- there can be a positive influence on children's general educational development (e.g. cognitive, emotional, cultural) and on the formation of a multilingual and intercultural identity.

3.2   Towards the older end

Berndt (2001) claims that education often has compensatory features for older learners, e.g. making up for missed opportunities; meeting people and maintaining or developing social contacts. Many attend in older age simply to have their brain stimulated, a process in which language learning is seemingly effective.

Bialystok and Hakuta (1999) argue against the abruptness of the CPH and claim instead that there is a gradual deterioration over time, often in areas such as capacity

to perform tasks under time-pressure, risk-taking, establishing long-term memory codes and ability to recall details. To this one might add that many older learners experience difficulties in hearing. In one's first language these difficulties may often be overcome by making guesses or predictions based on words partly heard, but in a second language this is more difficult because of the more limited vocabulary and cultural knowledge available to the learner.

Older learners may possess some or all of the following advantages over younger beginners:

- they may be able to plot their new language on to concepts about the world which they already possess from their first language. This can help greatly in vocabulary acquisition, c.f. Ausubel, 1964, and in making inferences as to meaning. Younger learners by contrast may have to acquire these concepts as well as learn how to express them in both their first and their additional languages;

- they may be more experienced in handling the discourse of conversations and other language activities, and thus may be more adept at gaining feedback from native speakers or teachers and in negotiating meaning, e.g. Scarcella and Higa, 1982;

- they are likely to have acquired a wider range of strategies for learning, e.g. note-taking, use of reference materials, searching for underlying pattern. This, allied to their established literacy in their first language, may help them become more efficient learners;

- they may have a clearer sense of why they are learning an additional language and may therefore be able to work purposefully towards objectives of their own choosing.

It is vital to understand however that the above-mentioned possible advantages of older learners are not exclusive. They of course become available to younger beginners as they grow older, making it possible for them to re-process their early language learning experiences in a more cognitive and analytical fashion. Classroom experience in several countries, however, suggests that many young learners are able to absorb and reproduce 'chunks' of learnt-by-heart language, without necessarily being able to manipulate language structure creatively according to a system of internalised rules. There is then a considerable challenge for teachers in finding ways of helping students link the intuitive and the analytical components of their learning, as they progress through their schooling.

Overall, the message from this section, and the preceding one, should be taken as good news. In principle it is never too early to begin, but equally it is never too late

to begin. Given a suitable context and support, learners of any age can benefit greatly from their attempts to learn an additional language.

4. Maximising the impact of different factors

Figure 1 below sets out a range of key factors which have a bearing on the 'age' question and which are of particular relevance in policy-making. Other factors in the 'process' of language teaching and learning are important in pedagogical decisions but are not included here.

Figure 1: Key factors bearing on the issue of 'age' in language learning

Social factors	Taking account of: ▪ the dominance of English as a foreign language ▪ whether native-speakers of English perceive needs for other languages ▪ the threat to 'minority' heritage and community languages groups.

Provision factors	Ensuring adequate provision of:
	▪ an explicit, long-term policy, backed by political will, dealing with factors such as:
	  - early to lifelong learning, with an emphasis on continuity within and across sectors;
	  - teacher supply, initial education and continuing professional development;
	  - appropriate aims, guidelines, approaches and materials;
	  - diversification of language learning;
	  - adequate systems for monitoring and evaluation;
	  - incorporation of insights from practitioner and other research.
	▪ sufficient time in the curriculum:
	  - time overall
	  - time distributed
	  - time engaged.

4.1 Social factors

Among the key issues in this area are:

▪ the emerging dominance of English as first foreign language across most (all?) countries in Europe where English is not the first or main language, and the

consequences this may have for the learning of other foreign languages in these countries;

- whether a real need is perceived among native speakers of English to learn any other language, and the consequences this may have for their capacity to participate meaningfully in a world which they cannot deeply understand; and

- the threat to the continuing vitality and existence of heritage and community languages in the face of international English and dominant national languages, and the consequences this may have for the identity and education of the communities which speak these 'minority' languages.

As a new Europe emerges, much therefore is at stake. It may be worth bearing in mind that this 'new Europe' seems to be moving simultaneously in two different directions. In one sense, it is expanding (e.g. through the enlargement of the European Union) and its boundaries seem to be ever more distant as new and seemingly 'different' peoples seek to join the family; in the other sense however the substantial movements of population (springing from sources as diverse as vocational mobility, asylum seeking and other) are bringing the new Europe closer and closer, and indeed into the immediate neighbourhood of many young children at school.

In the early 1990s one of the 'logics' of early language learning was to learn the language of one's neighbour ('Apprends la langue de ton voisin'. 'Lerne die Sprache des Nachbarn') which tended to be understood as learning the language of one's neighbour who lived across the frontier which was nearby. By the early 2000s however, this concept while remaining entirely valid in the original sense requires further interpretation to accommodate an enlarged view of the new Europe. 'Neighbours' may not only be neighbours across the immediate frontier but also 'virtual' neighbours in any part of the world, as children use the new information and communication technologies in inter-school partnerships when working on joint projects which are not primarily language-related but which lend themselves to bi- or multilingual communication. Early language learning must have a vital role to play in helping children understand and participate in this evolving society to which they belong. It is equally important for older learners, though in a different sense, insofar as older learners are likely to have already constructed their own concept of 'Europe' and may have difficulty in adapting this to suit the changing circumstances. Again in their case language learning has unquestionably a key role to play.

To its credit, the Council of Europe has given an unambiguous lead in advocating the benefits of individual plurilingualism within a culturally diverse, multilingual larger European society. However, the world, including Europe, is not a totally civilised place. There are profound underlying problems of stereotyping, prejudice, exclusion, fundamentalism and top-down standardisation to confront. This means that issues of

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societal attitude and motivation somehow have to be addressed, including attitudes to 'otherness', and to other languages, their speakers and associated cultures. There is a particular threat to so-called 'minority' languages, whether these are of the indigenous sort or reflect new trends in mobility and migration. Two key strategies for combating this through education are 1) encouraging speakers of these languages to maintain their self-esteem and their commitment to using these languages while at the same time participating in the 'majority language' community, and 2) encouraging children from the 'majority language' community to gain an experience and an understanding of the value which these so-called 'minority' languages and their communities of speakers bring to the wider society.

'Age' comes into this in relation to what an 'early start' programme potentially has to offer within a view of education which also firmly embraces lifelong learning. It does so in two ways:

- First, the early introduction of a new language makes possible the subsequent introduction of additional languages within the compulsory period of schooling. If Europe is to remain vibrantly multilingual in the face of the three social factors which I have highlighted above, then an early start is an essential component in securing this.

- Second, issues of 'languages and diversity' should become an essential ingredient from early education onwards. In their report on "Language learning for European citizenship" of the Council of Europe (1997: 63) argue that 'steps should be taken to sensitise children to other European languages and cultures… from the earliest age of socialisation.' This can be achieved by providing young learners with incentives and opportunities to experience, explore, reflect and report on, discuss and debate issues of languages and citizenship as a key formative process in their early education, and for older learners to re-visit them.

If these three social factors are not confronted at an early stage, then there is little reason to assume that in the present era of fierce globalisation our larger society will gradually and of its own accord learn to attach higher and higher value to diversity within a common but fast-changing society. They also generate a renewed debate about how different states and regions might make due provision for ensuring that they have a sufficient number of people within their populations who have some command of the increased range of languages which are in use.

4.2 Provision factors

4.2.1 Policy

What specific long-term policy factors should be addressed, if issues of 'age' are to be accommodated? These include:

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- the elaboration of a broad national consensus, backed up by political will, on languages education in society which incorporates not only an early start but also lifelong language learning;
- an adequate supply of well-trained teachers at all levels of education and training;
- adequate continuing professional development for teachers in post;
- the establishment of collaborative, cross-sectional processes and structures which will give strong support to continuity of language learning within and across the different sectors of education (e.g. primary, secondary, further, higher, vocational);
- appropriate materials and approaches for teaching an ever-widening age-range;
- adequate systems of monitoring and evaluation, in order to make the adjustments to policy that will inevitably be required as it is implemented over time;
- a degree of languages diversification to prepare students for participation in the larger multilingual society;
- incorporation of the best insights from research into such programmes, preferably with the active participation of practitioners in such research. This is particularly important, in view of the abundance of myths and the absence of valid empirical information on early language learning and the serious lack of research-based knowledge about 'third age' language learning.

Why are these issues of national provision so important with regard to 'age'? It will always be possible for inspired individual teachers or for innovative and effective schools to do something special which makes a real difference to learners of any age. Long may this continue. If however a state or an autonomous region seriously intends to prepare all of its students for meaningful participation in the new and emerging Europe and the wider global community beyond, then policies have to be developed which go beyond the individual and the school. Making a success of an early start and ensuring its continued success through primary, secondary and post-school education is too problematical to be left simply to goodwill or to market forces. It can be demoralising, and indeed a waste of time, for those teachers, students and parents who have invested heavily in making a successful early start to find that their efforts have been ignored or even undermined by others at a later stage.

To its credit, the Council of Europe has highlighted 'continuity' as a major issue. It has produced some excellent documentation to this end, e.g. its Report on Workshop 8B (1995). In addition, the Council of Europe's Framework and Portfolio have potentially a major role to play in helping those working with particular age-groups and at particular levels to gain a sense of where and how they might fit into the 'bigger picture' and to share a meaningful common dialogue with colleagues working with younger or older groups.

Experience across Europe tells us that policies for an early start urgently need to take serious account of 'sustainable development'. That is, they need to be long-term and to reach beyond the large numbers of successful short-term projects which have raised aspirations for a while but then run out of steam because of the discontinuation of funding beyond the project period or through changing priorities in education. Djigunovich and Vilke (2000: 79) report that after four years the Project classes were no longer allowed the benefits of intensive learning and small groups, and had lost some of their key teachers. 'This was an abrupt switch, which de-motivated the students who had got used to treating English as a happy event.'

For such policies to be effective in the long-term, it helps if they achieve cross-party support. In democratic countries, changes of government and hence of national policy are inevitable from time to time. It would be wrong for languages policy to be exempt from this, but equally it would be dysfunctional if changes of government were automatically to mean: 'Wipe the slate clean, let's develop a radically new approach to languages'.

4.2.2 Time

This includes the overall amount of time for language learning available during a student's entire education, the distribution of time within a year and indeed within a week, and (most importantly) the amount of time actually engaged, i.e. time actually spent in learning and using the target language. In all countries 'time' is an important factor, but in some it is vitally important where there is very little exposure to the target language in society outwith the system of schooling.

Curtain (2000) reports on a research study of three elementary school foreign language programmes in the USA, each of which had different time allocations. The hypothesis investigated was that 'the amount of time made available to learners in elementary school programmes is directly related to the amount of language proficiency that these students attain' (p. 93). Three different and key aspects of time were considered: first, 'time overall' within the programme; second, 'intensity' of time; and third, 'engaged' time. 'Intensity' was understood as the number of classes per week, i.e. five classes per week had a higher intensity than three classes. 'Engaged' time meant time actually used in teaching and learning in class. The study found that 'students given more time will do better than students with less time; students in more intense programmes will do better than students in less intense programmes. Students who have more time to use the target language will perform better than students who have less time' (p. 108). She concludes that 'programme planners need to know that there may be a minimum allocation of required allocated time and intensity below which language study, no matter how early it is introduced, may not be beneficial at all. Programme planners also need to know that, just as in other areas of the curriculum, allocated time itself is not as important as how it is used (p108).

5. Conclusions

▪ There is potential advantage in starting early, in that with appropriate teaching and a sufficient amount of time each week it can bring children's intuitive language acquisition capacities into play. This may help them over time in acquiring a sound system, a grammar and possibly other components of language which have something if not everything in common with a native speaker's command.

▪ Other compelling reasons for an early start are that this makes more time available overall, it makes it more possible to introduce other languages subsequently, and it fosters important underlying qualities such as a child's literacy, language awareness, and personal development (social, emotional, psychomotor and cognitive). It provides a formative educational experience which will encourage children to shape their own plurilingual and multicultural identity as befits the modern world in which they already live.

▪ In school settings any advantage which children may have over older beginners is unlikely to be immediately apparent, and indeed they may lag behind older beginners for a while in rate of learning, but it may come through in the long run, provided that certain key conditions are fulfilled.

▪ These key conditions include: long-term policy planning in order to achieve sustainable development as opposed to short-term 'fixes'; providing an adequate supply of well-trained teachers who among other things possess an excellent accent and intonation; supporting the professional development of teachers in post; establishing processes and structures for ensuring continuity of learning experience from the start through primary and secondary education; an explicit strategy for relating the learning of the target language to the child's first language, to the learning of other subject-matter and to transnational intercultural experiences (both 'real' and 'virtual') which go beyond language itself.

▪ In order to activate such intuitive capacities for second language acquisition as young children possess, it becomes important to allow a sufficient amount of time (time overall, time within each week and time-engaged on task) to provide the children with a sufficient amount of input (with good accent and intonation) and interaction, embedded in a range of intrinsically interesting cross-curricular activity. An early start involving a few minutes per day from a teacher who, however willing, is not confident or proficient in the language, and based on the assumption that things will succeed simply because 'younger = better', is unlikely to meet expectations. Nonetheless teachers of this latter sort may still make an important contribution to children's early language education by introducing their classes to recorded songs, poems, stories etc and by developing a more general 'language awareness' approach based in part at least on the

languages which the children bring with them into their school. An approach of this sort should not be seen as a 'second best' since it is of relevance to any group of learner, including those embarked on the early learning of one particular additional language.

- In many cases there will be substantial cost implications in meeting these conditions, hence the fundamental importance of securing clear and strong political will and of developing a consensual long-term approach.

- There is no clear evidence which suggests it is impossible for older beginners to attain very high levels of additional language proficiency. Older learners may indeed be more immediately able to draw on their wider knowledge of the world, of language and of strategy, in order to attain goals which they themselves have chosen.

- A new additional 'logic' for language learning might arise which is not primarily linguistic in essence. If primary schools in different countries see merit in developing strong 'virtual' links with each other so that their students may co-operate on joint projects, e.g. social, historical, geographical, economic, artistic, cultural, then communication in two or more languages might come to be seen as an excellent way of facilitating such projects.

- The Council of Europe's "Framework" and Portfolio offer an excellent starting point for bringing language learning at any age or stage into one coherent system of reference. This can be equally useful to students, teachers, parents and policy-planners by enabling those involved to see where and how they (at their particular age or stage, on their particular project or programme, learning their particular language or languages, in their particular locality, region and state) fit into a 'bigger picture', and to gain a sense of what students are likely to bring with them to their current stage and of what the current stage may lead to.

- In fact the good news is that, given suitable teaching, motivation and support, it is possible to make a success of language learning at any age and stage, though older learners are less likely to approximate to the levels of a native speaker. It is excellent if some older learners aspire to native speaker levels - some do and some get there. However, many rightly do not choose to go as far as that. Language learners young and old may prefer the less daunting but arguably more important aim of simply signing up to a multilingual world.

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