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## **PLURILINGUALISM? HAVE LANGUAGE-IN-EDUCATION POLICIES IN EUROPE DELIVERED THE PROMISE?**

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### **Introduction**

With a remit to construct Europe as a globally competitive unitary region (Robertson 2009: 65), underpinned by a perception that Europeans need to be equipped with the linguistic capital to communicate in Europe and beyond, the Council of Europe and European Commission have focused on promoting plurilingualism across the European space increasingly since the 1992 Maastricht Treaty (High Level Group on Multilingualism 2007:5). Within this climate, teaching languages in schools has become a high priority, resulting in a plethora of projects, reports and recommendations through the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century which have strongly promoted the introduction of foreign languages (FLs) from the earliest phases of primary schooling. This paper reports on the extent to which European recommendations have been realised at national levels, drawing on evidence from a major transnational longitudinal study (ELLiE 2007-10). Evidence suggests that the encouragement to introduce languages from the start of schooling has overwhelmingly resulted in English first, with other languages positioned as increasingly minor alternative choices. Interestingly, the ELLiE study reveals some evidence of Spanish emerging as the ‘cool’ language for a new generation of learners, but only on a limited scale at present, however.

### **European language-in-education policy**

A combination of parental pressure, political ambition, recommendations from a range of European committees and the pattern of global forces mainly accounts for the increased trend towards an early start for FL learning, often from the very start of schooling. A short summary of start age policies from around Europe demonstrates how radically the policy trend has changed during the past 20 years or so (figure 1).

<b>Compulsory start age</b> (for the 27 current EU member countries)			
	7 yrs or below	8-9 yrs	10-11 yrs
1990	2	1	24
2011	13	10	4

Figure 1: Europe: recent changes to national compulsory start age for second/foreign language learning (May 2011)

Whilst this demonstrates the extent of the shift over this 21 year period, it should also be noted that a large proportion of these changes occurred during the first few years of the new century, operating in parallel with a similar pattern in Asia at the time. Within this timeframe the pressure to ensure economic advancement was linked to new opportunities for communication via emerging

new technologies and hence, overwhelmingly English became perceived as *the* global medium of communication for business. It appears then, that the mandate for a European space where plurilingualism could facilitate borderless economic activity and social cohesion has now emerged as a rationale for prioritising global economic activity, with English perceived as the most valuable linguistic tool in achieving this and, thus, a priority from the start of schooling. This outcome is further reflected in the most recent published statistics on numbers of primary aged children learning various FLs in Europe (Eurydice network 2008). Although the current Eurydice data set were collected in 2006, it provides the most up-to-date picture of FL provision across Europe yet available, with some more recent, less comprehensive, data confirming that the provision of English at primary level continues to be an increasing trend. Eurydice (2008: 62) reports that, “In all European countries with the exception of Belgium and Luxembourg, English is the most widely taught foreign language in primary education”. Additionally, by 2006 more than 60% of primary school pupils were learning English with only 4% learning German, and 6% French.

With regard to the popularity of Spanish, Eurydice (2008: 69) data suggests that this was more likely to be taught only at upper secondary levels and then more often with an uptake level of 10-20% only. Italian occupied a similar position to this, with Russian being the fifth most likely FL to be studied in European schools.

### National primary languages policies

Analysis of language policies for schools at national level indicates that the decision on language choices is often taken at regional level or by individual schools. For example, Austrian education policy lists a total of nine languages that may be taught in primary school, particularly acknowledging the range of minority language groups in various parts of the country. Despite this freedom, 97% of schools opt to introduce English first, from the age of six years. The recent ELLiE research ([www.ellieresearch.eu](http://www.ellieresearch.eu)) has shown how varied approaches to determining language choice within policy statements frequently leads, nonetheless, to English being overwhelmingly the first choice for early start programmes. Figure 2 below summarises current policy on language choices in the seven ELLiE countries.

Country	Compulsory start age	Language choices (data set accurate at October 2010)
Italy	6 yrs	English
Netherlands	10 yrs (some start earlier)	No compulsory foreign language learning in Grades 1-4. Schools have freedom to choose. Current provision includes: English (139 schools, approx. 2%). German or French (40 schools, approx. 0.5 %). Other languages: Spanish (9 schools 0.1 %) or other language selected on ethnic minority grounds (e.g. Frisian).
Poland	6 yrs (from 2012)	Compulsory from Grade 1. Choice of English, German, French or Russian. Data for grades 1-3 English (93%), German (6,5%), French 0,1% Russian (0,1%)
Spain	6 yrs	Compulsory from Grade 1. Free choice of languages. English generally selected. Schools very occasionally select other languages (e.g. along the French border).

<b>Sweden</b>	6 yrs	From 2011, compulsory from Grade 1. English syllabus talks of English and modern languages (positioning English as serving a different function).
<b>Croatia</b>	6 yrs	A choice of English, German, Italian and French is available. Most learners' parents want their children to learn English. Choice of languages depends on individual schools and availability of qualified teachers.
<b>England</b>	Policy wording - 'all children have an entitlement from 7 yrs'	Choice unrestricted. Mainly French. French (89%), Spanish (25%), German (10%), Italian, Chinese, Japanese & Urdu (3% or less) (some schools offer 2 languages, each for 2 yrs, hence the total here exceeds 100%)

Figure 2: National policy for choice of first foreign languages (in grades 1-4)

In England, where it is difficult to determine which language might provide the most valuable cultural capital in the future, the tendency at primary level has been for schools to select the language of which teachers have some knowledge. In the past this has been French, perceived as a widely useful and prestigious language in many parts of the world and traditionally taught as first foreign language at secondary level. Early indications suggest this pattern may be changing as a younger generation of teachers begin to travel more widely, often spending time living or working in both Spain and Latin America where they gain some fluency in a variety of Spanish. Further popularity for Spanish relates to the growth of second or retirement homes purchased by UK families in Spain. Thus, more frequent visits to family and friends living in Spain has resulted in increased confidence in communicating in Spanish. These trends are reflected in the ELLiE data for England, which indicates that in the sample region approximately 35% of primary schools were teaching Spanish in 2008. Since then, the figure has increased still further. To some extent, similar patterns have been observed elsewhere in Europe – particularly in Sweden.

### Early language learning in Europe

The priority given to early language learning in Europe particularly over the past 10-15 years, generally draws on a perception that by making an early start, a higher level of fluency will be achieved by the end of formal schooling than would be possible with a later start. Johnstone (2009: 33) puts the case succinctly, saying, "Overall, an advantage of an early start is that in principle at least it allows young beginners to exploit such advantages as they possess, but in addition, as they become older, to make use of the advantages that older learners possess. So, over time, both sets of advantages are available to those making the early start, whereas only the second set of advantages is available to those beginning later". However, it is not sufficient to simply lower the start age to achieve these desired outcomes. For a national programme of implementation to be effective, wide ranging reform is necessary over a prolonged period. Whilst there now exists a great deal of expertise regarding the conditions needed to achieve effective implementation, insufficient evidence is yet available to confirm that this earlier start will *certainly* lead to fluency levels sufficient for the next generation to be able to operate effectively in all domains of the FL for regional and international communication. In terms of how to effectively evaluate this, we are still at an early stage of this research field.

The recently completed Early Language Learning in Europe study (ELLiE, 2007-10) contributes to a new phase of data evidence by establishing a transnational, longitudinal approach to empirical research in this area. A multi-method approach has made it possible to interweave both quantitative and qualitative data to interrogate what is currently achievable during the early primary phases of FL learning in Europe. In the next section some examples of data are presented as an indicator of the current progress towards establishing the conditions for effective implementation in Europe. This is followed by further discussion of some of the current limitations to implementation identified in the study. Finally, the potential contribution to plurilingualism that these policy initiatives might make over time is reviewed.

### Implementing early start policy in Europe – data from the ELLiE study

This section provides a sample of findings related to aspects of policy implementation that can be identified as central to effective implementation. Variations in policy across countries are discussed in relation to particular national/regional histories. Figure 3 introduces a summary of the many essentials to be addressed when formulating FL policy for an early start.

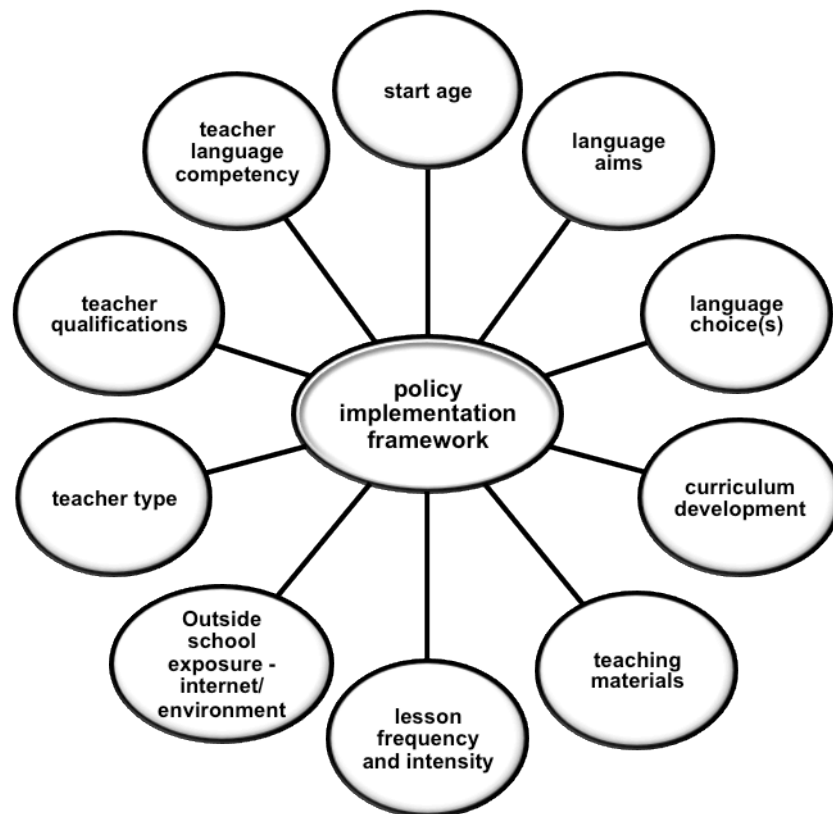


Figure 3: ELLiE 2010: Planning model for primary languages implementation

#### i. Teacher qualifications and expertise

Across the 7 ELLiE countries there was much variation in the teacher preparation required and provided for primary teachers of FLs. Whilst there was general agreement on a preferred national

model for teaching FLs to this age group, with a strong preference for a primary trained teacher with expertise in the FL, at least at B1-B2 level, as defined by the CEFR levels for FLs (Council of Europe 2001), in Poland it continues to be difficult to employ sufficiently well trained generalist class teachers able to teach the FL. This also applies to some extent in England and Italy. In England and Sweden no minimum language competency is specified, whilst in Poland, although well qualified generalist teachers are available, the demand for specialist English teachers throughout the age range results in them more often employed to teach just English.

Data evidence from the ELLiE study suggests that the availability of appropriate pre- and in-service teacher education preparation continues to be insufficient across all seven countries. Whilst pre-service provision is available in all countries, pathways to qualifying as a generalist primary teacher with high level fluency in the target language and additional skills in teaching FLs to young children are not widely available. In Poland, for example, despite adequate teacher preparation, many prefer either to emigrate or to teach in private language schools due to the low salaries in state schools. In-service professional development courses are available in all seven ELLiE countries with extensive provision on a national scale in some cases. However, this is generally optional and attendance can be poor in some countries, particularly where courses are only available after school hours.

In summary, whilst there has been much progress in the provision of pre- and in-service courses for the reform implementation, much yet remains to be achieved. A recent review of policy in Sweden offers one example of how future policy might be designed to achieve the desired aims. From July 2011 Sweden introduces new teacher education programmes with English becoming a compulsory subject (including both teacherly skills and language proficiency) for all generalist teachers of six year olds and above. Over time, this will provide the teachers needed to deliver the new national curriculum requirement for compulsory English from seven years. It seems that national pre-service provision of this nature is needed, if the goal of plurilingualism is to be met.

## **ii. Language aims and outcomes**

Policy statements in the ELLiE countries have tended to refer to the CEFR descriptors as a reference point for identifying desired language achievements. Expectations vary slightly, with Sweden anticipating an achievement level of A1 by nine years, Croatia by 10-11 years, England and Poland by 11 years. Netherlands and Italy expect a higher achievement level of A1+ by 11 years. Classroom realities however, sometimes revealed a very different picture, both within and across countries. Two major factors that accounted for much of the variation related to the levels of motivation and the amount of out-of-class exposure to the FL experienced by the children. To some extent these factors can be considered as inter-related. Achieving and sustaining motivation in class over time could generally be attributed to a skilled teacher who regularly used varied and engaging approaches to teaching and learning, supported by appropriate teaching materials. Such teachers were observed in all seven country contexts, to a greater or lesser extent. Where larger class sizes were observed (class sizes ranged from 7-30 across the study sample) the teacher's task in keeping the whole class engaged was noticeably more challenging.

The amount of out-of-school exposure to the FL was shown to be a further significant factor in children's achievement. Exposure occurred through family friends and holidays, watching TV and

listening to radio programmes (sometimes via computer), together with parental support including help with homework and showing an interest in what happens in the FL classroom. The extent to which out-of-school exposure can make a difference to in-class motivational levels was interestingly reflected in the summary round of data collection in 2010. During this period a number of the interviewees in England from classes learning Spanish reported listening to internet commentators reporting on the World Cup in Spanish. Their enthusiasm and pride at having enjoyed and approximately understood the commentary confirmed the potential of social opportunities for language learning even for these young children. Across the whole study sample these kinds of exposure varied from substantial to almost insignificant in some cases.

Overall, language development amongst the learners of the ELLiE study was shown to be a dynamic process with many individual factors influencing motivation and progress over time. Differences between learners in the same class also increased over the three years of the study. Highly significant variation in outcomes can be related to societal use of the FL and to language distance. Broadly speaking, language achievement by the age of eleven years could be described as fairly limited, with some notable exceptions. Levels of motivation and increasing confidence in communicating in the FL were seen to be developing significantly however. Given the dynamic nature of language learning, it will not be possible to fully assess the impact of this early start until children have been able to take advantage of 'the second set of advantages' that Johnstone (2009: 33) identifies as being available to learners "as they become older".

### **The promise of plurilingualism**

The above evidence indicates the strong potential for achieving a mainly bilingual citizenry throughout Europe, assuming the further strengthening of current provision models is consolidated over time. Extensive early start provision can thus serve to establish language learning as an essential part of children's basic education in Europe. As one example of how substantial the shift has already been, England placed towards one end of the continuum as a country where state school provision occupied little or no part of the primary curriculum for many years prior to its introduction in 2005, has now developed substantial provision. Whilst quality still remains variable, the NFER survey (2008) reported that FLs had been introduced in 92% of primary schools and was expected to reach close to 100% by 2011.

The nature of such extensive provision clears a path for the introduction of a second foreign language around the age of 12+, with the possibility for capitalising on prior language learning experience and thus making rapid progress towards a minimum of B1 competency in the second FL by the end of compulsory schooling. The majority of European education systems now have a requirement for all students to learn two FLS throughout the general secondary level of education (Eurydice 2008: 31), although there is great variation in some contexts. For example, the FL policy at general secondary level in England currently requires only three years of compulsory FL learning (one FL), making it optional from 14 years. This has resulted in many students opting out, with less than 43% in England choosing to take the national language exam at 16+ (CILT 2010). As the impact of early start policies outlined above begins to be felt at secondary level, it is possible that the demand and motivation for language learning opportunities at secondary level may increase.

In this notoriously unpredictable field it is beyond the scope of this article to speculate far ahead. Many previous forecasters have been unable to anticipate social, political and economic events that have radically altered public perceptions of the cultural capital to be gained by learning a FL. With rapidly increasing developments in multimodal digital technologies it is likely that future generations will find new solutions to the challenges of communication that are beyond our contemporary imaginations. What is evident, at present, is that globally fluency in at least one foreign language (mostly English) is close to becoming an expected outcome for all education systems, but the promise of plurilingualism may not be relevant to all contexts.

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