THE CHALLENGE OF THE BOLOGNA PROCESS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION LANGUAGE TEACHING IN EUROPE

The report focuses on the challenges which the Bologna Process sets for Higher Education language teaching in Europe. It is suggested that, although the Bologna Process involves a reform of many aspects of Higher Education, it has particular implications with respect to language teaching and learning. The report addresses these implications from three main perspectives - languages and academic mobility, languages and employability, and lifelong language learning. In each case, the report surveys the pedagogical resources which are currently available for responding to the need in question, while also highlighting the specific challenges which language teachers face in the current context. In addition to this, the report discusses the strategic challenge of extending language teaching to a wider range of students and staff in Higher Education, which involves consideration of the development of institution level language policies. In conclusion, it is suggested that, although the Bologna Process sets many challenges for Higher Education Institutions, it also creates a context which is rich in opportunities for the anchoring of language learning in the daily life and practice of Higher Education in Europe.

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1. Introduction

Higher Education Institutions across Europe are currently involved in a major process of reform and restructuring as part of what is referred to as the Bologna Process (or, to give it its full title, the Bologna-Prague-Berlin Process). This process is the result of a series of meetings and policy documents produced by the Ministers responsible for Higher Education in, by 2003, 33 European countries. The main documents relating to this process are:

- The Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999 signed by the Higher Education Ministers of 29 European countries - "Towards the European Higher Education Area".
- The communiqué of the meeting of European Ministers in charge of Higher Education, Prague 19 May 2001.
- The communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education, Berlin 19 September 2003, signed by the Higher Education Ministers of 33 European countries – "Realising the European Higher Education Area".

(The original documents and other relevant information on the process are available of the site www.bologna-berlin2003.de/en/main_documents/index.htm)

The stated goal of this process as stated in the Preamble to the Berlin Communiqué (Berlin Communiqué, 2003) is "the development of a coherent and cohesive European Higher Education Area by 2010". This goal is pursued by means of a number of specific policy initiatives relating to:

- Quality assurance, including European cooperation in the area
- Adoption of a degree system based essentially on two cycles
- Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees
- Establishment of a system of credits
- Promotion of mobility
- Promotion of the European dimension in Higher Education
- Involvement of students and other social actors in Higher Education
- Promoting the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area
- Lifelong learning

These measures affect various aspects of the organisation of Higher Education (HE), and their implementation is giving rise to extensive reflection and institutional change throughout Europe. (cf. Reichert and Tauch, 2003 for an overview). The more visible changes in HE such as new degree structures, however, are not ends in themselves. Rather, they reflect a will to re-think HE in Europe in response to a number of economic and geopolitical features of the world of the 21st century. It is therefore useful to look briefly at these factors in order to better understand the long term goals pursued by the Bologna Process and the challenges it sets for Higher Education institutions (HEIs) in Europe.

2. The Bologna Process in context

One of the factors which underpin the reforms initiated within the Bologna Process is the emergence of the *knowledge-based economy*, which is steadily replacing previous economic models in Europe and throughout the developed world. Education, and HE in particular, plays a

key role in furthering the successful transition to this new economic model. For this reason, the Bologna Process calls upon HEIs to re-assess their current practice in the light of the new demands being made by the knowledge-based economy and to prepare students meaningfully for these demands. Another key factor is the process of *globalisation*. National borders are becoming ever more permeable, with increasing cross-border movement in terms of capital flows, trade, and employment. The Bologna Process seeks to support this phenomenon in Europe by removing the obstacles which stand in the way of mobility, in particular with respect to the comparability and mutual recognition of academic qualifications. There are of course links between the growth of the knowledge-based economy and globalisation, if only because responding to the demands of the new economic model frequently calls for a concentration of resources and expertise which may not be available within the borders of any one country. Finally, there is the growing trend towards increased *economic and political integration within Europe*, which is evidenced by the adherence on 1st May 2004 of ten new member states to the European Union. The Bologna Process is both a reflection of and a means of concretising, within the field of HE at least, this drive to greater European integration.

In other words, the Bologna Process is not simply a reform of HE for its own sake. It is rather a strategic response of European governments to the current economic and geopolitical context. Indeed, the Berlin Communiqué reaffirms the goal of the Bologna Process as expressed in European Councils in Lisbon, 2000 and Barcelona, 2002 as that of making Europe "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and social cohesion" (Berlin Communiqué: 2). The Bologna Process thus rests on an analysis of the current economic and geopolitical situation in Europe. It pursues objectives which are not simply educational in a narrow sense of the term, but which derive from a vision of the role which HE has to play in the social and economic life of Europe.

This report focuses on the implications of the Bologna Process for the field of HE language education. This will be done around four main topics – languages and academic mobility, languages and employability, lifelong language learning, and HE language policy. The report raises more questions than it offers solutions, but its goal is to contribute to reflection in an area which is occupying the attention of many language teachers and other institutional actors in HE in Europe, and which is likely to continue to do so in the foreseeable future. Although the topics dealt with have implications with respect to language specialist degrees, its main focus is on the teaching of languages to students of other disciplines, ie. students who may not have any formal language provision in their degree programme.

3. Languages and academic mobility

Traditionally, national educational systems in Europe have operated largely as discrete entities at national level with limited systematic cooperation with one another. The Bologna process seeks to change this situation so that HEIs come to operate not only nationally but also internationally, as part of a broad European network of HEIs. Greater transparency and comparability of degree structures, and the removal of legal obstacles to the recognition of degrees clearly play an important role in the promotion of academic mobility. Simple common sense, however, indicates that academic mobility among 33 countries with over 20 different national languages calls for explicit consideration of language skills. In part, this raises a strategic question relating to the

way in which individual HEIs position themselves with respect to academic mobility and internationalisation. (This point will be discussed in section 6, below.) It also, however, raises a number of directly pedagogical questions for HE language teachers with regard to the communicative skills which are required within the framework of academic mobility in the multilingual and multicultural context of the European continent.

Academic mobility within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) calls for a potentially wide range of communicative skills which arise out of the various tasks which students, academics, and administrative staff may have to perform in a foreign language. The more obvious communicative situations and skills which these actors are likely to encounter include the following.

Gaining access to specialised material in another language. This is currently most necessary with respect to written information sources (frequently in English). With the increase in distance learning, shared degree programmes, and the mobility of both students and teaching staff, however, the understanding of lectures, note taking, and participating in seminars in a foreign language are likely to assume increasing importance.

Participating in mobility programmes. This includes the needs arising out of participation in the specifically academic side of such programmes, but also settling-in and general social skills, so that participants can live a rounded professional and social life during their periods of study or teaching in another country.

The *professional communication skills* required of academic staff, such as participating in conferences, making academic presentations, preparing reports, and writing articles.

Participation in international projects, by both academic and administrative / managerial staff.

Socialisation skills to facilitate semi-professional exchanges and networking.

Which of these situations assumes the most immediate relevance for the students or staff of a given institution at a given point in time will be linked to the strategic positioning of the institution in question with respect to mobility and internationalisation, and would thus normally be dealt with within the framework of the language policy of the institution in question (cf. section 6, below). Once such decisions have been made, however, it is necessary to identify the specific linguistic and communicative demands of the target situations of use as a basis for focused course development. A substantial body of research has been accumulated in recent decades into the needs of students following HE programmes in another language, especially with respect to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) (eg. Flowerdew and Peacock, 2001; Jordan, 1997). This offers a valuable framework of theory and pedagogical practice which can be used to guide and underpin focused course design .

This having been said, the development of the EHEA is giving rise to a novel academic environment, and it is by no means certain that we currently have sufficient knowledge of the communicative needs which students, academics or other actors are likely to meet in this environment. For example, both students and staff are likely to find themselves in multilingual and multicultural settings which will call for skills of cultural understanding, adaptation, and

mediation, in addition to the more objectively identifiable communicative skills listed above. Interaction is also likely to take place in a language which is not the first language of many participants, which potentially alters the communicative dynamics in a number of ways. This is especially the case with English, which is assuming a particular role as the lingua franca of academic life in Europe. Then there is the question of the skills which both students and academics need in order to adapt not only to different languages, but also to different intellectual and academic traditions (Berthoud, 2003a). The challenge of academic mobility in Europe is thus of course in part a linguistic challenge. It is also, however, a cultural challenge in that students, academics, and others will find themselves operating in different cultural and academic contexts. This is a relatively unfamiliar landscape in both cultural and communicative terms, and therefore merits focused research if we are to be in a position to develop relevant pedagogical responses (Berthoud, 2003b).

Preparing students and staff for life in the EHEA thus calls in part for the relatively objective type of needs analysis which has been developed within the framework of EAP, based on the specific situations in which actors will be called upon to use one language or another. It also, however, calls for a parallel line of research into the specific nature and communicative demands of the current academic context in Europe.

4. Languages and employability

As already suggested, the structural changes in HE which most visibly characterise the Bologna Process are not a goal in themselves. Their objective is rather to create a framework within which HEIs can contribute more fully to the development of the knowledge-based economy in an increasingly globalised academic and professional context. Reichert and Tauch (2003: 27, op. cit) express this as follows:

"Preparing graduates for the European labour market is regarded as one of the three most prominent driving forces of the Bologna Process. Together with the enhancement of academic quality, this constitutes the most frequently mentioned force behind the Bologna Process, according to the representatives of ministries, rectors' conferences and higher education institutions. Student associations also regard this as the most important driving force, together with the competitiveness of the national HE systems."

The question of employability relates to a wide range of factors. In the light of the increasingly mobile, multilingual, and multicultural nature of the European workplace, however, language skills are coming to assume increasing importance in terms of employability. Two surveys conducted in the UK bring out this point very clearly. Hall (2000: Chapter 2.4), with reference to the Scottish economy, points out that "Most of Scotland's trade is with non-English speaking markets" and that "The European Union is Scotland's largest export market" to highlight the economic importance of having a linguistically able workforce. Connell (2002), in an extensive survey of the role of languages in UK business and trade, repeatedly points to the negative economic consequences of inadequate language skills among employees on business performance. Specifically, Connell points to the influence of language skills on companies' ability to export and to participate fully in the international economy.

"Not having a (language) policy in place can be measured in terms of lost trade and opportunity: the executive survey to the LNTO report on Yorkshire indicates that 21% of export firms know that they have lost trade; 45% know that there are barriers for them when trading abroad; and 20% are aware that inter-cultural skills are a problem." (Connell: 13)

"A lack of (language) skills would appear to be a key inhibiting factor, preventing companies from expanding their horizons and breaking into new markets. 10% of the SMEs involved in the Luton survey either never visit buyers nor receive customers from abroad. Yet nearly half of all exporting SMEs use some language other than English in their transactions with overseas buyers – and one third of those are classified as non-successful exporters. This may be linked also to the fact that almost 75% of the firms concerned did no market research before attempting to enter new markets. A lack of language skills or country-based expertise may have been a contributory factor." (Connell: 7)

These remarks underscore just how important a role languages play in companies' ability to participate fully in international economic activity. Indeed, a survey conducted for *Professional Manage*r in 1999 (Vandevelde, 2000) found that 35% of the managers questioned felt that language skills would be of vital importance to business success in the 21st century.

It is relevant to bear in mind that these comments originate from the UK, and that English is a very widely spoken language. In other words, if UK (and thus English-speaking) companies have such a strong need for language skills to function effectively on the international scene, then the same is surely true of companies and organisations which traditionally work with less widely used languages. If HEIs wish to prepare their students effectively for the current international workplace, they cannot therefore ignore the role of languages in the professional training they offer to their students. This firstly involves making place for languages in students' academic programmes, and then setting relevant learning objectives.

In the case of HE programmes which prepare students for a more or less discrete set of professional tasks, establishing language learning objectives may be a fairly straightforward task, in principle at least. Since the publication of Munby's (1978) seminal work on needs analysis, the language teaching profession has developed a wide range of needs analysis techniques which make it possible to analyse the language needs of individuals working in various professional domains (eg. Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Mackay and Mountford, 1978; Robinson, 1991; Sarangi and Candlin, 2003; West, 1994). There thus exist research methodologies which make it possible for language teachers to analyse the language needs generated by specific professional situations and, on this basis, to develop appropriate pedagogical responses.

Other factors, however, raise a number of questions with respect to the identification of students' employment related language needs in the current economic and educational context. In the first place, many HE programmes do not seek to prepare students for any one specific professional situation. In such cases, it may simply not be possible to identify the situations in which graduates may need to use the target language. Furthermore, the economy is in a process of change, which means that the demands of the workplace will almost inevitably evolve over time. Many if not most young graduates are likely to change direction at some stage of their careers, assume more or less new functions, and have to adapt to the linguistic demands of these

functions. This situation therefore raises questions as to how students may best be prepared for the demands of unknown and potentially varied communicative situations.

These questions relate to the terms in which the objectives of language learning should be formulated in contexts where it is difficult to identify with confidence students' future communicative needs. Specifically, should the goal of language learning relate more to the preparation of a given *product* (as defined in terms of a discrete set of linguistic or communicative skills) or to the development of a *potential*, involving the ability and also the willingness to adapt to the demands of new communicative situations, including the learning of a new language, as and when circumstances may require? Then, of course, there is the question of how such skills can best be developed in pedagogical terms. These points will be looked at further in the next section with respect of lifelong learning.

Responding to the role of languages in employability is one of the many challenges which the Bologna Process sets for HEIs and for HE language teachers. In certain contexts, this challenge can be met by means of a traditional needs analysis based approach to course design. However, the changing and increasingly international nature of the labour market raises questions which cannot be addressed easily within the framework of traditional needs analysis. Traditional needs analysis is *reactive* in the sense that it rests on the analysis of the linguistic and communicative demands of more or less clearly identifiable situations of use. As already indicated, however, many HE programmes do not prepare students for easily identifiable professional tasks. Furthermore, in the rapidly evolving international context, it may be impossible to know precisely which language skills, or even which language, students may need in their future professional life. In this situation, it may be more productive to adopt a *proactive* approach to language skills. This would involve viewing language learning as an educational process in its own right geared to helping students prepare a potential for future language use and language learning, even if it may not be possible to identify with any precision what students' specific language needs may be, either on graduation or at subsequent stages of their professional life. Clearly, this moves beyond the confines of a traditional, or reactive, perspective on needs analysis and would view language learning as an employability oriented educational activity in its own right.

The next section develops this point further. Nevertheless, it is clear that the changing nature of the international labour market, and the increasing role of languages in terms of employability, requires all HEIs to give serious consideration both to the role of language learning in HE, and also to the nature of the learning objectives to be pursued.

5. Lifelong language learning

The promotion of lifelong learning is an explicitly stated goal of the Bologna process. It is a response to the rapidly evolving nature of social and economic life, and the consequent need for individuals to pursue their learning beyond the limits of their initial degree programme and / or to initiate new learning cycles. In part, the call for HEIs to promote lifelong learning relates to the setting up of learning structures available to persons already engaged in professional life and who wish to upgrade their existing skills or acquire new ones. It also, however, involves the pedagogical and attitudinal preparation of students for lifelong learning within their initial period of HE study. The article will focus only on this aspect of lifelong learning.

While lifelong learning is an important goal in all domains, it is of particular relevance with respect to languages (Mackiewicz, 2002). Given the number of different languages spoken in Europe and beyond, there is every likelihood that graduates will, at one stage or another of their career, have to extend their skills in an already known language or initiate the learning of another language. The question is therefore how HEIs can best prepare students to meet this challenge. In other words, how can HE prepare students for the learning of a potentially wide range of different languages when, in most cases, it is unrealistic to expect them to study more than one or two languages as part of their degree programme?

It was suggested in the last section that the answer to this question lies in a re-definition of the goals of language learning. The goals of most language learning programmes are formulated in terms of a certain *product* – a given body of knowledge about or a given set of skills in a certain language. This is, of course, perfectly coherent, and language learning programmes evidently do need to pursue such goals. In addition to this, however, preparing students for lifelong language learning involves the setting of goals which relate to the *process* of learning. In this case, the outcomes of a learning programme would be defined in terms of students' ability to approach situations of language use and language learning in an informed and self-directive manner. The ultimate goal in this perspective on language teaching is *learner empowerment*. An empowered learner is not simply a person who has acquired a given level of competence in a given language: Empowerment relates rather to the quality of the learner's interaction with both the use and the learning of languages. An empowered learner would thus be able to analyse their strengths and weaknesses with respect to specific situations of language use, to evaluate what they need to learn in order to meet their objectives, and to make informed decisions about how to go about achieving these goals. In other words, an empowered learner is one who has acquired transferable learning skills which go beyond the confines of a given level of competence in any one language.

Achieving this goal represents a challenge on at least two levels. The first involves the definition of process-related learning outcomes, ie. outcomes relating to students' learning skills and attitudes to the learning process as opposed to more objectively observable language competences. In this respect, it has to be acknowledged that, despite the considerable attention which has been given to the concept of learner autonomy in recent decades (eg. Benson and Voller, 1997; Brookes and Grundy, 1988; Holec, 1981, 1988; Little, 1991; Wenden 1991, 2002; Wenden and Dickinson, 1995), operationalising process- as opposed to product-oriented objectives is by no means a simple task, especially perhaps with respect to evaluation techniques. The second challenge relates to the setting up of pedagogical procedures which are capable of helping students develop greater autonomy and self-directiveness as language learners.

Pursuit of the goal of learner empowerment entails two main pedagogical processes (Tudor, 1996). The first involves an initiation of learners into the processes of language learning. In the first place, this involves helping students to realise that they can in fact play an active and self-directive role in their own learning. (This is of particular importance if the students in question have in the past been exposed to a knowledge-transmission based approach to learning in which their main role was to assimilate items of knowledge chosen and pre-digested by others.) This stage is what is generally referred to as *learner training*. The second stage involves a gradual shifting of decision making from teacher to learners and thus increased *learner involvement* in the learning process itself. The shift of decision making from teacher to learner can operate at many

different levels, from fairly simple grammar exploration activities to project work involving the gathering and sifting of learning materials in the target language (Tudor, op. cit: 197-229).

Setting learner empowerment as an explicit goal of HE language teaching goes a long way to resolving the vexed question of which language or languages students should learn. In the short term, such choices are likely to be dictated by the type of factors considered in the last two sections or by the specific linguistic situation in a given country. In broader terms, however, if pursued with the goal of increasing learner involvement and self-directiveness, learning any language can allow students to develop skills that they will then to able to transfer to the learning of other languages as and when circumstances require.

6. Towards a HE language policy

The previous sections have highlighted a number of challenges which the Bologna Process sets for HE language teachers. The "language question", however, is not something which concerns only those who are directly involved in the design and delivery of language programmes. It is also a strategic issue relating to the way in which HEIs position themselves with respect to the broader goals of the Bologna Process. There is evidence that at least a certain number of HEIs are beginning to address the language question strategically by initiating focused reflection on the role of language learning in the programmes they offer and by setting in place measures designed to extend language learning to a wider range of institutional actors (Bruen, 2004; Carty 2003; Chambers 2004; Head et al, 2003; Langner and Imbach 2000).

Many if not most HEIs do, of course, organise language teaching in one form or another, either for language specialists (degrees in modern languages or in language-related professional areas such as translating or interpreting) or for students of other disciplines. An institution level language policy, however, involves a number of explicit and strategically oriented decisions with respect to the goals and organisation of language teaching and learning. For example, has the institution made an explicit decision to provide language learning opportunities to all its students (or all undergraduates, at least)? Has it set up consultation and decision making structures which allow for the analysis of its language needs and for the planning of focused action in response to these needs? Has it made choices with respect to the structures within which it organises language teaching (in a language centre or department, or on a faculty basis, for example)? Does it have a policy on students' participation in mobility programmes or on the teaching of courses in another language? These are just some of the many questions which need to be addressed if HEIs wish to prepare their students for the current academic and professional context in Europe and beyond. Taken together, institutions' responses to these questions form the basis of a HE language policy.

This having been said, the notion of HE language policy is something of a novelty, and it is at present unclear how many institutions in Europe have a more or less explicitly formulated language policy. Chambers (2004) found that out of 21 HEIs surveyed, only 3 reported having a language policy, although 8 reported that they were developing one. Tudor (2005), as part of the project *European Network for the Promotion of Language Learning among all Undergraduate*s (ENLU) www.fu-berlin.de/enlu/ conducted a survey of 32 HEIs. Of these, 10 had a language policy and that a further 13 were developing one. Both surveys, however, are small in scale and may not be representative of the broader situation in Europe.

Furthermore, many questions arise as to how such a language policy should best be set up, as well as how it can be realised in pedagogical terms. Three main models emerge from the studies by Chambers and Tudor cited above regarding the development of a language policy. In one case, language policy originates in a language department or language centre; in another, it is senior mangement which is responsible for making policy decisions, and in a third, language policy is developed collaboratively by a consultative committee composed of different categories of institutional actors (typically, management, deans of faculty, and language specialists). Diversity also exists with respect to the intitutional structures within which language teaching is organised. In Tudor's survey, 19 respondents reported that language teaching was organised in a language centre, 29 that it was organised in language departments, and 16 that it was organised in non-language specialist departments (eg. a faculty of business or medecine). As there were only 32 repondents in the survey, it is clear that different teaching structures co-exist in many of the institutions concerned.

Nor does it appear that setting up a language policy is an easy task - 23 out of 32 respondents in Tudor's study reported the existence of obstacles to the setting up of a language policy in their institution. The most frequently mentioned obstacles relate to the funding of such a policy, various intitutional problems (eg. fitting languages into the programmes of non-specialists at the expense of "core" subjects), and attitudes (in the main, convincing institutional actors of the importance of language learning). On the last point, Kelly (2003) points to the frequent gap between a fairly general theoretical acceptance of the role of languages and a reluctance to take concrete steps to make extended language learning a reality.

The situation with respect to the development of institutional language policies is thus varied. On the one hand, there is evidence that at least a certain number of HEIs are addressing the language question strategically. On the other hand, however, many questions remain open as to the best way to set up and organise such a policy. There are also many obstacles to the practical implementation of a language policy. This having been said, it is unlikely that the expansion of language learning in HE which is necessary to ensure the successful realisation of the Bologna Process will come into being without explicit strategic decisions at institutional level. Consequently, this too is a challenge, not just for language teachers, but also for the management of HEIs.

7. Bologna: Challenge and opportunity

This report has outlined a number of challenges which the Bologna Process sets for HE in both pedagogical and organisational terms. In addition to setting challenges, however, the Bologna Process offers many opportunities for promoting language learning.

To begin with, the increased academic mobility which is promoted by the Bologna Process can help to make both individuals and institutions more aware of the role of languages, and thus set a motivational agenda for an expansion of formal language teaching. It also opens up many opportunities for contact with speakers of other languages and thus for an extension in informal language learning. In addition, increased international cooperation, which is another stated goal of the Bologna Process, offers language teachers the possibility of initiating joint projects with colleagues in other countries and, in this way, of developing shared responses to shared

challenges. The questions raised in previous sections with respect to the role of languages in academic mobility and in employability, for example, are European in nature and would therefore most productively be addressed within the framework of a Europe-wide research project. The Bologna Process is thus as much an opportunity as a challenge for language teaching and language teachers across Europe. The interaction of opportunity and challenge is a complex one, however. On the one hand, the development of the EHEA opens up many possibilities for more extensive language learning in both formal and informal contexts. On the other hand, the effective realisation of the EHEA depends crucially on an extension of language learning both in society as a whole and also in HE.

This report set out to look at the challenges which the Bologna Process sets for HE language teachers, and there are indeed real challenges in gearing language teaching to the demands of the increasingly multilingual and multicultural context of Europe and of the EHEA. Perhaps the greatest challenge, however, faces HE actors other than language teachers, most of whom would need little persuasion as to the importance of language learning. The European Commission (COM, 2003) has emphasised the importance of all undergraduates obtaining a language qualification as an integral part of their degree programme. Achieving this goal, however, calls for a re-evaluation of the role of language learning in HE and this, in turn, calls for strategic action on the behalf of HEIs. Thus, while the Bologna Process does set a number of directly pedagogical challenges for language teachers, it also sets challenges for the management of HEIs. Indeed, it is only by concerted strategic action at institutional level that students will be able to receive the necessary opportunities for language learning, and that language teachers will be able to focus their energies constructively to respond to their specifically pedagogical challenges.

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