

SIGMA Scientific Committee on Languages

LANGUAGE STUDIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN EUROPE

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INTRODUCTION

The sixteen National Reports on *Language Studies* presented in this volume were written as part of the SIGMA Project, which was set up by a consortium of six institutional networks in 1994 and is conducted under a contract from and in close co-operation with the European Commission (DG XII - Education, Training and Youth).

The purpose of the SIGMA Project is to evaluate, in six selected subject areas, past European inter-university co-operation - especially co-operation within the ERASMUS programme - and to formulate concrete proposals for future co-operation, taking into account the activities envisaged under the SOCRATES programme. One of the subject areas selected is *Languages*.

In late 1994, the consortium convened six Scientific Committees - one for each of the six subject areas selected-, which were charged with carrying out the Project. Each Scientific Committee was to comprise leading experts drawn from institutions of higher education in the fifteen Member States as well as representatives from academic and/or professional organisations, the European Commission and the SIGMA Executive Committee. Each Committee was to be chaired by an academic with expertise in language studies and international co-operation.

Among the members of the Scientific Committee on Languages are 16 national experts from 14 Member States and from Norway and Switzerland. There are also representatives from C.I.U.T.I. (Conférence internationale permanente d'Instituts universitaires pour la Formation de Traducteurs et d'Interprètes), ESSE (European Society for the Study of English) and from the Commission.

Like the other five Committees, the Scientific Committee on Languages was given three main tasks:

- i. to produce National Reports for the countries represented on the Committee;
- ii. to undertake, with the support of a junior researcher, an evaluation of past inter-university co-operation in the given subject area (ERASMUS Report);
- iii. to organise and hold, in co-operation with the Commission and a university represented on the Committee, a major international conference to discuss the reports and to map out concrete proposals for future co-operation.

The conference on Language Studies is going to be held at the University of Stockholm on 9-10 June 1995.

To our knowledge, this is the first time a comprehensive and coordinated overview of the area of Language Studies in higher education in Europe has been attempted. In order to allow readers in general and the participants of the Stockholm Conference in particular to

compare and synthesize the National Reports, the Scientific Committee drew up a structure to be observed by all 16 rapporteurs. The structure was adopted at the first Committee meeting on 19 December 1994 and revised at the second meeting on 27 February 1995 in the light of the draft reports prepared for that meeting.

The complexity of the structure underlying the reports is a reflexion of the complexity of the area of Language Studies. It is also an indication of the fact that the special status and the role of Language Studies in higher education and the general political implications of this area set it apart from the other subject areas such as Business Studies, Law or Physics, to mention just a few.

The following considerations would seem to be relevant in this context.

- i. Foreign language competence is of central importance to the creation of Europe. Language competence is necessary to support co-operation and transcultural understanding. Higher education institutions have a central role to play in helping citizens in the European Union (and beyond) to acquire this competence.
- ii. The European Union does not believe in the idea of having one common language - a *lingua franca*; it supports a diversity of languages and cultures. This is one, but by no means the only reason why Language Studies in Europe cannot be seen as having to do with just one or two major languages; rather, Language Studies are concerned with a large variety of languages.
- iii. Unlike other subject areas in higher education, the field of Language Studies is not normally regarded as an academic discipline in its own right. Traditionally, Language Studies form part of a given modern language course alongside other components such as linguistics, literature and cultural studies. In a sense, this is also true of more recently introduced courses in "applied language studies", which combine Language Studies with aspects of other disciplines such as Business Studies and Law.
- iv. Languages are relevant for and potentially pervade all courses of studies in higher education. The internationalisation of science and research, the increasing physical mobility of students and, more generally, the demands of a multi-lingual Europe call for and in many cases have resulted in increased provision of language programmes for students of other disciplines.
- v. Language Studies in higher education cannot be seen in isolation; the teaching and learning of foreign languages in higher education are interrelated with language teaching at school level. In a given country or region, students can be expected to have a prior knowledge of (a) certain language(s), and to have no prior knowledge of certain other languages. Teaching being one of the few careers earmarked for modern language graduates, the status of a language in higher education and the size of a language programme largely depend on whether or not that language is a school language. In this way, school policies directly affect language programmes in higher education.
- vi. With the exception of teaching and translating/interpreting, language programmes do not normally lead to specific professions. Students often choose language programmes because they are interested in foreign languages, literature and culture, and not because they are thinking of particular careers. Seen in this light, language programmes have an intrinsic educational value. However, there is no denying that the professional requirements of language teaching, translating and interpreting call for professional training; also, the linguistic demands of a multi-lingual and multi-cultural Europe cannot be ignored by those responsible for language programmes.
- vii. In Language Studies, the relationship between teaching and research is a more indirect one than in other disciplines. This has partly to do with the fact that in spite of all the research effort that has gone into questions of language acquisition and language learning we still do not know with any degree of certainty how languages are learnt. What is known is that learning a language is different from the learning required in other academic subjects. This does not mean, however,

that Language Studies are detached from research. On the contrary, the increasing importance of Language Studies calls for increased research efforts in related areas such as applied linguistics.

- viii. Inter-university co-operation in general and student mobility in particular are desirable in all disciplines; they are essential in Language Studies.

The reports are broadly structured as follows: Sections 1 to 6 describe the status quo. Section 7 is devoted to the identification of new needs, taking into consideration the development of Language Studies, professional requirements and the demands resulting from the creation of a united Europe. Section 8 proposes concrete measures to be taken to satisfy the needs identified, recognising three levels of responsibility: the institutions, the regional and national authorities and the European Union.

Among the many positive effects of inter-university co-operation under ERASMUS have been an increased awareness and a better understanding among academics of the systems of higher education in other European countries in general and of different approaches to and trends in specific disciplines in particular. Such understanding and awareness is, in a sense, a prerequisite for achieving one of the central aims of ERASMUS: the recognition of qualifications and periods of study obtained abroad. Also, without a thorough understanding of the systems and practices in place in partner institutions the developments of joint curricula would have been inconceivable. However, it would seem that in many cases the knowledge and understanding of what is different has remained incomplete and did not transcend the bounds of a given ICP.

The ERASMUS programme as we have known it for the past eight years has been seeking to increase academically meaningful student mobility in Europe while observing a certain balance among the various academic disciplines. Following the Treaty of Maastricht, the SOCRATES programme is to place greater emphasis on supporting quality in education and training. In particular, it is, through transnational activities, to stimulate, encourage and give targeted support to specific measures planned or taken at institutional, regional and national level. In this, Language Studies figure high on the agenda.

The concern of the SOCRATES programme with questions of quality and content in higher education in general, and in Language Studies in particular, imparts special significance to the National Reports on Language Studies. In providing a *systematic* picture of the status quo in the various countries and in identifying new needs in the area of Languages, the reports can serve as a source of mutual stimulation, encouraging the adoption of new measures at national, regional and institutional level. More importantly, they can serve as a point of departure for conceiving new transnational activities to be adopted within the guidelines of the SOCRATES programme. In other words, the Reports will enable experts in the field to identify areas for and to initiate discussions about concrete forms of transnational co-operation in Language Studies, thus lending support to the emphasis inherent in the SOCRATES programme on content and quality in inter-university co-operation.

As was mentioned above, the Scientific Committee held its first meeting shortly before Christmas 1994. This means that the national rapporteurs had just four months, in some cases less than four months, to write their reports. Because of the time constraints, it was impossible in this volume to draw general conclusions from the reports as a whole. In a sense, this was never intended. It will be the task of the participants of the Stockholm Conference to assess the implications of the Reports and to draw up recommendations on the basis of the Reports.

Although, as was pointed out earlier, the Reports attempt, for the first time, to provide a comprehensive overview of Language Studies in the European Union and beyond, they should not be regarded as "objective" in a strict sense.

The authors wrote the Reports as academic experts and not as representatives of any organisations or authorities. The opinions expressed in the Reports are their own personal views.

The authors come from different backgrounds, ranging from literature to linguistics, applied linguistics, language teaching methodology and applied language studies. They represent different languages, occupy different positions and come from different types of institutions and departments. Thus, while all the Reports are informed by a firm commitment to Language Studies and to inter-university co-operation, the points of view underlying the Reports differ considerably.

It is my personal opinion that the "subjective" character of the Reports, far from diminishing their value, has resulted in a particularly rich and multifaceted presentation of the complex area of Language Studies, which is bound to generate fruitful and lively debate at the Stockholm Conference and beyond.

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