

Language Policy in Flemish higher education in Belgium: English in an academic context

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Teaching in a bilingual and multicultural city as Brussels makes you reflect on the use and the importance of the teaching language in education.

Although English is an international language, French and Dutch are the official languages of instruction in the capital of Belgium.

In this article I explain why the use of the Dutch language at Flemish universities is such a delicate matter considering the long struggle in history to obtain the right to teach in the mother tongue in Flanders.

What is the role of English at Flemish universities today? What is the legislation concerning the use of the language of instruction and what is the language policy of Flemish universities? How can we define the criteria for academic English?

In conclusion I look at the future and analyse what linguistic opportunities exist in Flanders and Brussels at universities.

Keywords: language policy, official language of instruction, linguistic opportunities in Flanders/Brussels

1. Introduction

Living in Belgium and teaching in a bilingual and multicultural city as Brussels makes one reflect on the use and the importance of the teaching language in education, in my case higher education.

Life looks different in Dutch or in French in Brussels. The newspaper Metro, free available on public transport, gives a different look to the world depending on the fact if you are reading it in Dutch or in French. Language defines our world, decides how we are thinking.

Although the use of English is very important in an international city like Brussels, French and Dutch are still the official languages of instruction in the capital of Belgium.

As both communities learn each other's mother tongue less and less, English will perhaps play an important role in the future. This is at least what some researchers claim.

The discussion about the language use has always been very lively in Belgium. Last winter I noticed an increasing number of articles about this topic in Flanders and two important conferences were organised:

a. A debate at the Ghent University on 23.11.2010 about the role of English in higher education.

b. A workshop at the Antwerp University on 17.03.2011 about language policy in higher education.

This present interest in language use and language policy in Belgium in the field of education was the reason for my decision to talk during our conference in Koper about the linguistic situation in higher education in Flanders (Belgium) today.

In this article I would like to explain first why the use of the Dutch language at Flemish universities is such a delicate matter considering the long struggle in history to obtain the right to teach in the mother tongue in Flanders.

2. Teaching in Dutch or in English at Flemish universities?

In the beginning of the 20th century Flemish politicians from different convictions collected petitions to defend the importance of higher education in the mother tongue. At that time the language of instruction was French.

In March 1911 a bill was put forward in parliament which aimed at a gradual introduction of Dutch at the Ghent University.

I mention this year because we are now exactly 100 years later. What happened in the mean time? What is the situation now?

The anglicization of higher education in Flanders is going fast. The Flemish people seem to have partly given up the idea that language is giving identity to its people and have rather chosen for globalisation.

In the twenties of last century however the political struggle for the language of instruction at Flemish universities was intense. A bilingual structure was elaborated: students could choose between a Flemish and a French section. But this "half and half university" was not successful.

We had to wait until 1930 when Ghent University could completely function in Dutch. The rector August Vermeylen had already launched the call: "In order to be something we should be Flemish. We want to be Flemish to become Europeans."

Generations of Flemish intellectuals have been fighting for the right of education in the mother tongue. That is the reason why the topic of my presentation is a delicate matter in Belgium and why the Flemish Parliament is still hesitating to change the law and allow education in English. The whole debate is held in an emotional atmosphere. Language is still seen as a part of identity like in France while the Netherlands have a more pragmatic vision and use English for international communication when it is simply more profitable.

This explains why the present legislation in Flanders is very restrictive: only 10% of the bachelor degree and only 50% of the master can be taught in a foreign language. This foreign language will be English in most cases.

The Flemish decree of 4 April 2003 stipulates that there should be a balance between the use of Dutch and foreign languages (particularly English) as language of instruction. The students should participate in international mobility and Flemish universities should aim at an international reputation. But how to reach these objectives is not clear in the discussions of the parliament.

In a resolution the Flemish Parliament has asked the Flemish Government for a liberalization of the present linguistic legislation. According to this motion more courses should be taught in English. The recommendations are the following:

1. Expand the possibility of courses in English in the second and third bachelor year from 10% to 17%.
2. Organize the master degree in English if there exists already a parallel master programme in Flanders in Dutch.

It is clear that universities want to attract more international students and prepare the own students better for an international career. Therefore a liberalization in the legislation would be positive.

If the recommendations are accepted, they will be introduced in Flemish universities in 2012-13. But compared to the Netherlands they are only a weak compromise by trying to give still enough attention to the Dutch language.

In the study programmes of the Netherlands the transition to study programmes in English was organized in a much more drastic way: in some cases the whole study programme is taught in English. However, we hear from our Dutch colleagues that the results are not so positive.

In Flanders the risk exists that we will soon create a “half and half university” again when some master degrees are changed into English programmes and others aren’t. The consequence could be a difference in status and prestige in international rankings when English becomes the criterion for quality and excellence.

But the anglicization is at the same time an opportunity which should be tackled in a pragmatic way and for which the restrictive legislation should be expanded.

On the other hand the dominance of one common language is the reason in Europe why other languages are oppressed and have less to offer in cultural exchanges.

An example here is the Erasmus mobility programme which, twenty years ago, sought immersion in the language and culture of the host university. The result is that the common language in mobility today is almost always English.

This growing anglicization in the field of education in Europe means an impoverishment of the other languages and cultures. As a result of the uniformization the linguistic and cultural mosaic in Europe is threatened. It also leads to the spread of the Anglo-Saxon way of life where the commercial aspect at universities plays an important role.

Already today Flemish universities offer 244 study programmes in English, 1 in French and 1 in Spanish¹.

Some advantages of study programmes in English can be mentioned:

1. Students are better prepared for an international career.
2. Universities can attract more foreign students and so have more financial resources.
3. Joint programmes and joint degrees between universities can be elaborated more easily with the result of collaboration and networking in Europe.

But one can also name some disadvantages of educational programmes in English:

1. Students often need specific vocabulary in their mother tongue for their job afterwards: e.g. law students.
2. Students don't want their own teacher to teach in English because it creates an artificial situation.
3. The language competence of the teacher can be poor. Anyway, when a person can't speak his mother tongue, one can observe an impoverishment of expression.
4. The university needs extra facilities (class rooms, timetables, teachers etc.) for parallel courses in English.

More in general, we have to ask ourselves what the objective is of higher education. Should it be organized mainly for the benefit of society or equally to support science? One of the main reasons to make our universities Dutch speaking in the last century was the social role of higher education: a doctor, lawyer or economist should be able to communicate with their own people and should therefore use the language of these people.

Higher education should not only offer good training but should also participate in the social debate in a critical way. This should happen in the mother tongue.

In the light of democratization education in English may not be a barrier for young people to study.

But the present situation is basically different from the conditions 100 years ago. Internationalization is a must in a globalizing world.

¹ <http://www.studyinlanders.be>, 23.02.2011

Therefore we should look for a solution where more English in higher education is possible but under three conditions:

1. Teaching in a foreign language is only then allowed with a motivation that another language than Dutch is necessary in a specific situation.
2. The first two years of the bachelor degree should be mainly taught in Dutch.
3. Teachers who are not able to teach in English, are not allowed to do so. We don't want Dungleish in the class.

But let's be realistic: for some study objects the future won't be in Dutch.

2. ELF-ish or Dungleish? What criteria?

Academic English is much more than conversational English. To be successful in classes that are conducted completely in English, students need to be able to read large amounts of academic material in English, understand lectures given in English, think critically about the ideas they have read and heard, and express their understandings and critiques of ideas through speaking and writing in English.²

Can our students, staff and researchers reach this level? Many of them know English less well than they think. They use short sentences, few connecting words and a simple grammar.

When one describes factual information, this is not a problem. But when the discussion gets more philosophical, this language level causes an enormous impoverishment of the discussion as people express themselves less subtle.

What do students think about teachers? Printed teaching materials should be written in perfect English. But the oral performance in English is much more difficult for the teachers. Moreover, teaching in English is much more tiring when English isn't your mother tongue.

In our case efficient communication is disturbed by interferences between English and Dutch, two languages who are linguistically spoken quite close. Also the lack of knowledge of the so important idioms and collocations is problematic.

The language proficiency of the students is probably sufficient for understanding courses in English, but insufficient for writing papers or for giving oral presentations.

² http://www.tuj.ac.jp/newsite/main/app/academic_english.html, 25.04.2011.

Which criteria are important for ELF? ELF is a variety of English which needs sufficient common features in order to function as a means of efficient communication, in our case, as a *lingua academica*.

1. In my view, the pronunciation is important, a.o.
 - The contrast in length of the vowels (e.g. leave/live);
 - The sound in specific words (e.g. allow, know how);
 - The distinction between soft and sharp end consonants (e.g. mug /muck);
 - The accent in difficult words for foreigners (e.g. development, comfortable, determine, management).
2. Typical for the English language is that communication is not always very much disrupted when one makes serious mistakes against grammar:
 - He look very sad: verb without -s ending
 - No articles in front of substantives
 - Mixing who/which/that as relative pronouns
 - Mistakes against verbs in the -ing form
 - Use of "isn't it?" instead of e.g. "haven't they?" or "shouldn't it?".

More research is needed concerning the comprehension of ELF in different communication situations. One should carefully examine whether the message of the speaker is understandable for (non) English speakers.

To stimulate efficient communication the factor communication is more emphasized in the Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning than the use of correct grammatical rules like it was in traditional foreign language teaching.

In the language centra of some Flemish universities students and teachers can get extra in service training in academic English. Students even need extra training for writing skills in academic Dutch. For teachers the command of English can be a condition for work appointment.

But the language policy at universities can't be one of English-only. The EU is promoting the knowledge of at least two foreign languages. For Flanders this should be French in the first place and may be German, both official languages of Belgium.

In Slovenia the situation is undoubtedly much more interesting considering the many different languages of the neighbouring countries.

3. Opportunities in Belgium

Flemish universities need language policy guidelines in which Dutch is the primary language, but where at the same time linguistic diversity is encouraged, with English as the main foreign language. The University of Oslo calls this parallel-lingualism (in “the language policy guidelines for the University of Oslo.”³

It is obvious that in Flanders and certainly in Brussels the English-only variant is not enough as French is the main language in Brussels and is at the same time an official language in Belgium. This situation I consider for us to be an opportunity.

Concretely this would mean that:

1. In the bachelor degree we prefer to teach in the mother tongue
2. In the master degree we can organise special study programmes in English if necessary for academic reasons.
3. Research can be carried out in English depending on topic and field. Doctoral dissertations should at least include an abstract in English and one in Dutch.
4. International students and staff should be offered Dutch language courses.

Finally, let me give an example of collaboration: a Dutch speaking and French speaking university in Brussels offer a bilingual bachelor in law, a field where it is important to know both main languages of Belgium.

Many similar initiatives in Brussels could be taken in the future but we are waiting in Flanders for a liberalization of the legislation on language use in higher education.

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³ http://www.uio.no/english/for_employees/support/profile/language, 03.06.2011)

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