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BASQUE AS A MINORITY LANGUAGE AND ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: ARE THEY COMPLEMENTARY LANGUAGES IN THE BASQUE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM?

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ABSTRACT

Since Basque acquired co-official status with Spanish in 1978, efforts to revive the language have been made; however, Basque is still clearly a minority language. Nevertheless, the Basque Government has decided to go even further and turn the bilingual system into a trilingual one. At a preliminary stage, this will be carried out by implementing experimental programmes in which Basque, Spanish and English will all become languages of instruction. As a result of this changing educational context, some people consider that the ever increasing role played by English could jeopardize all the efforts made so far to boost the presence of Basque in and out of the school, as the presence of two international languages could become a hurdle too high to overcome. In this paper this issue will be analyzed by focusing on the research studies available, in an attempt to shed some light on the controversy.

Key words: trilingualism, minority language, foreign language, Basque language

IL BASCO COME LINGUA MINORITARIA E L'INGLESE COME LINGUA STRANIERA: SONO LINGUE COMPLEMENTARI NEL SISTEMA EDUCATIVO BASCO?

SINTESI

Nonostante gli sforzi di rimmetterlo in uso da quando è stato riconosciuto come lingua co-ufficiale con lo spagnolo nel 1978, è evidente che il basco rimane una lingua minoritaria. Il governo basco, tuttavia, ha deciso di andare oltre e trasformare il sistema educativo bilingue in trilingue. Nella fase preliminare questo sarà attuato mediante programmi sperimentali nei quali il basco, lo spagnolo e l'inglese fungeranno tutti da lingue di insegnamento. Alcuni ritengono che come risultato di questo cambiamento introdotto nel contesto educativo il ruolo crescente della lingua inglese potrebbe mettere in pericolo gli sforzi finora compiuti per rafforzare l'uso del basco all'interno e al di fuori delle scuole, poiché la presenza di due lingue internazionali potrebbe diventare un ostacolo troppo grande da superare. Con lo scopo di fare luce su questa controversia, l'articolo analizza la questione basandosi su ricerche disponibili.

Parole chiave: trilinguismo, lingua minoritaria, lingua straniera, il basco

INTRODUCTION

In 1995 the European Commission published the Whitepaper entitled *Teaching and Learning: Towards a Learning Society*, where it was set as an objective that all European citizens should be proficient in three European languages (their mother tongue plus two other Community languages), as this will give them advantages when it comes to obtaining a job, when deepening understanding between European citizens, when trying to hold xenophobia at bay or when taking up the option of mobility available within the European Union (the Socrates/Erasmus programme could be a very good case in point), to name but a few of these potential advantages. The concept of Community languages referred to the national languages of two other EU member-states, although in later European Commission documents this was specified in such a way that »reference was made to one foreign language with high international status (English was deliberately not referred to) and one so-called 'neighbouring language'« (Extra, Yagmur, 2004, 403).

In this context it is worth paying attention to the special Eurobarometer survey 54 (International Research Associates, 2001), which was focused on the language skills of European citizens and their attitudes towards language learning, its main findings being the following:

- 93% of parents say it is important that their children learn other European languages, especially in the new Länder of Germany (100%), Greece (98%) and Spain (96%), whereas on the other side of the coin 22% of Belgian parents state that language learning is not important.

- 72% of Europeans believe that knowing foreign languages is/would be useful for them, especially to improve job opportunities.

- 71% consider that everyone in the European Union should be able to speak one European language in addition to their mother tongue, and almost the same proportion of respondents believes that this should be English.

- 53% of Europeans say that they can speak at least one European language in addition to their mother tongue.

- 26% say that they can speak two European foreign languages.

These percentages show that there is still a long way to go to have the European Commissions' objective fulfilled, as roughly one quarter of European citizens can speak two foreign languages. Moreover, there are important differences between the different European States, as this knowledge is more common in places

such as Finland, but not so usual in other States such as Spain or Italy.

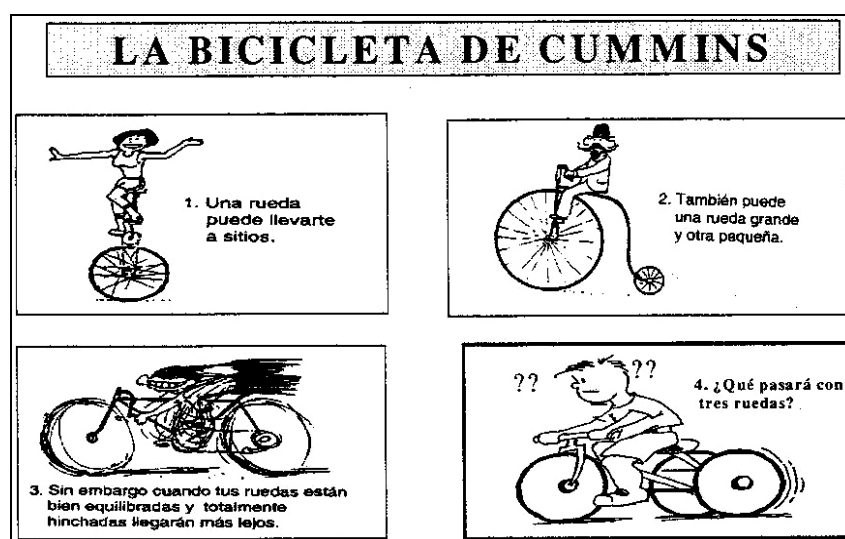
This boosting of multilingualism means that in all European bilingual areas students will have to deal with four languages in the curriculum: the minority and majority languages plus two Community languages. This is the case of the Basque Country, a bilingual community where both Basque and Spanish are official languages and therefore taught compulsorily in the three different linguistic models available.¹

It is widely believed that the learning of a foreign language from an early age brings about a better command of the language concerned, which is why the European Commission considers desirable to start its teaching at pre-school level, whereas the second Community foreign language should be learnt in secondary education. Thus, during the last few decades there has been a clear trend to lower the age at which the foreign language learning begins and, as a result of this situation, there is an increase in the number of years during which this learning is taking place.

Overall, English is most often spoken as a first foreign language in Europe and moreover it is learnt by almost 90% of European students (as a first, second or third foreign language), and this is specially so in the Basque Country and in the rest of Spanish bilingual (and monolingual) communities, where the hegemony of English is outstanding. In some Spanish communities pilot projects have been implemented enabling pupils to set out learning a foreign language, overwhelmingly English, before it becomes compulsory at the age of 8. In fact, Spain is the only European country where English as a foreign language is taught as early as the age of three or four (Eurydice, 2005). Although according to curricular requirements pupils have to start learning a foreign language from the age of 8 onwards, some Autonomous Communities have been able to begin from the age of 3 onwards. As a matter of fact, the vast majority of Basque schools have taken advantage of this possibility and are teaching English at nursery school.

One of the main worries concerning the learning of the foreign language has to do with the fact that Basque students end up their compulsory education with a rather poor command of English (Cenoz, 1991; Lasagabaster, 1998). In fact, a recent survey (Lasagabaster, 2003) carried out among 1,087 Basque University students, only 6% considered themselves as having a very good command of the English language. This percentage is undoubtedly very low, even more if it is taken into account that university students represent the elite of Basque students.

1 For further information on the Basque educational system see Gardner (2000) or Lasagabaster (2001).



**Fig. 1: Cummins's bicycle and early trilingualism (Etxeberria, 2002).
Sl. 1: Cumminsovo kolo in zgodna trojezičnost (Etxeberria, 2002).**

Although in the Basque Country there is strong public support for this early learning, a reflection of the so-called *consensus view* (Singleton, 1995), some voices have complained about the risk it may entail, as they consider that the ever increasing role played by English could jeopardize all the efforts made so far to boost the presence of Basque in and out of the school, as the presence of two international languages (Spanish and English) from a very early age at school could become a stumbling block in the language revival process. Osa (2004, 134), despite acknowledging that multilingualism represents the future, puts it bluntly:

Basque has to become the main language in the school context and all linguistic planning should foster this condition. Nowadays, in many places, this is not the case at all. What's more, in order to avoid the negative effect of this foreign language learning on both the command of Basque and the attitudes towards the minority language, there is a need to stop the trend to foster the early learning of English, which entails a reduction of the space for Basque.

Etxeberria (2002), when tackling this early trilingualism at school, refers to Cummins's bicycle to make it clear that this early introduction of the foreign language has raised doubts about how effective it really is and how harmful it can be when it comes to the Basque language.

In this illustrative series of pictures Cummins utilizes the wheels of the bicycle as metaphors of the different languages and to summarize the effects of bilingualism (Cummins, 2001, 171). As can be seen in the first vignette, one wheel (that is to say, one language) can get the learner to different places, and so can a big wheel and a little wheel (second vignette). However, when the

learners' wheels are nicely balanced and fully inflated, they have the possibility of going further (third vignette), provided, of course, the people who made the wheels knew what they were doing: that is to say, if balanced bilingualism is encouraged and achieved. Nevertheless, and as can be seen in the last vignette, in this new trilingual context the question is what may happen if a third wheel is added: Are they too many wheels? Etxeberria (2004, 197) is highly critical of this early trilingualism:

There is no solid basis for justifying the introduction of such programmes at the nursery stage. None of the studies examined provide the slightest theoretical justification that these kinds of programmes can be carried out with a minimum guarantee of efficacy or success. I believe that there has been a kind of unjustified logical jump in assuming that all that is valid for bilingual education must also hold good for trilingual learning.

In any case it has to be pointed out that these critical voices are not dead set against the teaching of English, but rather consider its teaching should be put off, as this ever earlier teaching could have a negative impact on the learning of Basque. When dealing with trilingual education in the Basque Country, Cenoz (2002, 43) highlights that »the main obstacles that these programs face are related to the weak position of Basque in its sociolinguistic context and the status of English as a foreign language in the Basque Country.«

That is the reason why in this paper this issue will be analyzed by focusing on some of the few research studies on this issue available, in an attempt to shed some light on the controversy. Thus, we will firstly analyze the effect of this early teaching on language competence and secondly its impact on attitudes towards Basque.

THE EFFECT OF EARLY FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING ON LANGUAGE COMPETENCE

In this section the effect of exposure to English from an early stage on the other two languages (Basque and Spanish) will be analyzed. The Federation of *Ikastolak* (Basque schools where Basque is used as the means of instruction and Spanish is only taught as a subject) undertook research to evaluate the early project of multilingualism at several schools where children had started to learn English at the age of 4 since 1992 (Garagorri, 2002). In their studies they were supported by a group of researchers belonging to the University of the Basque Country when it came to designing the project and the tests used in the evaluation, as well as when analysing the results. The experimental group was made up of 195 students who were in the second year of Secondary education (13–14 year olds) and had been learning English for 10 years (since they were 4); the control group (154 students) were also 13–14 year olds and had started English classes at the age of 8, that is to say, four years later, as established by the Educational Reform of 1993. Both groups shared many characteristics, as all the schools involved followed the model D linguistic program (Basque is the vehicle language and Spanish is taught only as a subject) and the same educational and linguistic project, all of them having the same sociocultural level too. The participants took Basque, Spanish and cognitive development tests (the non-verbal cognitive ability was controlled by means of Raven’s Progressive Matrices Test) from the start of their participation in the experimental program. The results obtained can be seen in the following figure:

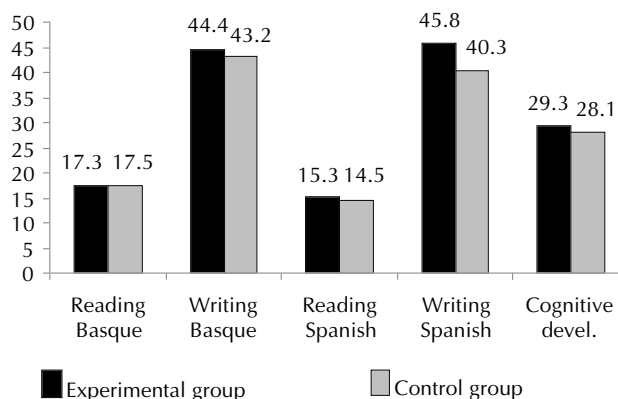


Fig. 2: Results in Basque, Spanish and cognitive development.

Sl. 2: Rezultati pri baskovščini, španščini in kognitivnem razvoju.

After ten years, and as hypothesized, no statistically significant differences were detected in either Spanish, Basque or cognitive development, which is why the group of researchers in charge of the study concluded that the early teaching of English did not hinder the normal development of the students, neither in Basque and Spanish, nor as for their cognitive development. Studies completed in Catalonia (Bernaus et al., 2004) also demonstrate that the learning of English as an L3 does not have any negative impact on the L1 and L2 (Catalan and/or Spanish).

The follow-up study by the Federation of Basque schools (Garagorri, 2002) also analysed the effect of early exposure on English language proficiency. As mentioned above, it has to be remembered that the ex-

Table 1: Group means and SDs obtained by the experimental and control groups on English (L3) tests (Garagorri, 2002).

Tabela 1: Povprečja in standardne deviacije za poskusno in kontrolno skupino pri angleških (L3) testih (Garagorri, 2002).

	Experimental group		Control group	
	Mean*	SD**	Mean	SD
Written production	8.93	4.15	5.62	4.47
Reading comprehension	8.62	3.91	6.90	4.52
Oral comprehension	15.76	5.15	11.90	6.42
First grammar test	9.47	2.88	7.10	3.38
Second grammar test	4.47	3.99	2.37	3.41
Oral production	13.10	4.84	9.48	4.94

*Mean: It is the most common type of average that is computed. It is the sum of all the values in a group, divided by the number of values in that group.

**SD: The standard deviation (abbreviated as SD) represents the average amount of variability in a set of scores, that is to say, the average distance from the mean. The larger the standard deviation, the larger the average distance each data point is from the mean of the distribution.

perimental group set out to learn English at the age of four in the 1992–1993 school year, whereas the control group started four years later. The sample was the same we described above when dealing with the effect on Basque, Spanish and cognitive development. As for English, the hypothesis stated that those who started at an earlier age (4 year olds) would obtain better scores than those who started at a later age (8 year olds), but under three main conditions: a) students should be taught English from the age of 4 till the end of compulsory education; b) both teachers and parents should hold positive attitudes towards the experimental programme; c) teachers should be trained and have the necessary teaching materials available (materials designed by the Federation of Basque schools). The independent variable was thus the age of first exposure to the foreign language (4 versus 8) and the dependent variable was the level of proficiency attained (the four language skills and grammar). The data was gathered in the 2000-01 school year, that is to say, the experimental group had been learning English for nine years, and the control group for five years. Table 2 apporitions the results obtained by the experimental and the control group in the different English tests (Table 1).

The table above clearly reveals that the experimental group outperformed the control group in every single English test, the difference being always some 25% in favour of the former. Moreover, these differences were especially significant in the case of the tests that are traditionally more difficult for the learner of an L2, that is to say, grammar (9.47 versus 7.10 in the first test and 4.47 versus 2.37 in the second), speaking (13.10 versus 9.48) and writing (8.93 versus 5.62). These results have been confirmed by another study completed in the Basque Country and focused on the writing skill (see Doiz, Lasagabaster, 2004). Therefore, it can be concluded that the early exposure to English does have a clear and positive impact on English proficiency and with regards to the four language skills and grammar.

THE EFFECT OF THE EARLY TEACHING OF ENGLISH ON LANGUAGE ATTITUDES

In the following lines a study (Lasagabaster, 2007) carried out in the Basque Country and whose participants were university undergraduates will be described. The participants were 222 university students who were enrolled in the Teacher Training Degree, which enables them to teach in Primary Education (6–12 year olds). Although all the subjects were completing the first year of their different degrees in Vitoria-Gasteiz, the political capital of the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC), they came from the three provinces (Araba, Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa) of which the BAC consists. The mean age of the subjects was 20 years and regarding their specialization, 31.1% were studying Nursery Education, 28.4%

Primary Education and 40.5% Physical Education. As is usually the case among the would-be teachers, the vast majority of students were female (68.5%), whereas their male counterparts were just 31.5%. The distribution of the participants depending on their mother tongue can be seen in Figure number three.

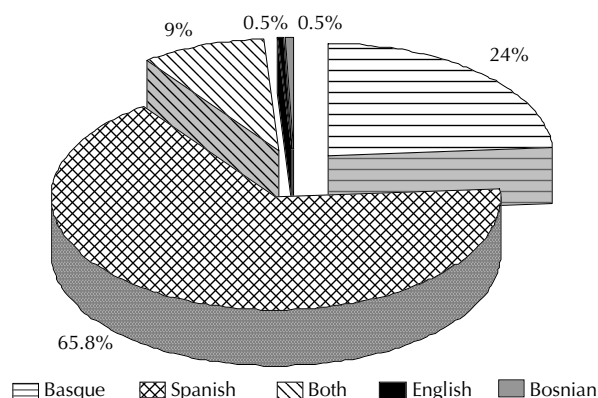


Fig. 3: The students' L1.
Sl. 3: Prvi jezik pri učencih.

Although almost a quarter of the future teachers' mother tongue was Basque, plus 9% who had both Spanish and Basque as L1, the majority of them had Spanish as L1 (65.8%). Two students were English and Bosnian respectively. In the case of the foreign language, 48.2% had started to learn English before the age of 8 (the majority of them at the age of 4) and the remaining 51.8% at the age of 8 or later. Last but not least, it has to be said that 32% of the students had been enrolled in model A (Spanish is the vehicle language and Basque is only taught as a subject) at pre-university levels, 13.1% in model B (both Basque and Spanish are vehicle languages) and more than half of the sample (55%) completed their studies in the more popular model D (Basque is the means of instruction and Spanish is only taught as a subject).

The participants completed a questionnaire on language attitudes based on Baker's (1992) and which had been previously used (Lasagabaster, 2003) in the Basque context. The final section of the instrument focused on language attitudes by means of the same ten items on a five-point Likert scale for each of the three compulsory languages in the Basque curriculum, namely, Basque, Spanish and English.

The attitudes towards each of the three languages in contact were codified in the following way: the option *Strongly Agree* (SA) was recoded as 100, the option *Agree* (A) as 75, *Neither Agree Nor Disagree* (NAND) as 50, *Disagree* (D) as 25, and *Strongly Disagree* (SD) as 0, a procedure already utilized in other studies (Lasagabaster *et al.*, 2005). Once the results were codified, the average

for the ten items related to each language was obtained, which allowed us to distinguish three categories: (i) the first one was made up of *Unfavourable attitudes*, that is to say, those between 0.000 and 33.333; (ii) the second category comprised *Neutral attitudes*, for those whose scores were between 33.334 and 66.666; (iii) the third one consisted of those students who held *Favourable attitudes*, i.e. those between 66.667 and 100.000. In this way, we had at our disposal a *quantitative* variable (the average score for the ten items) which could also be used as *qualitative* (depending on their favourable, neutral or unfavourable attitudes).

In the following figure the effect of the early teaching of English on the attitudes towards Basque of this future teachers can be observed.

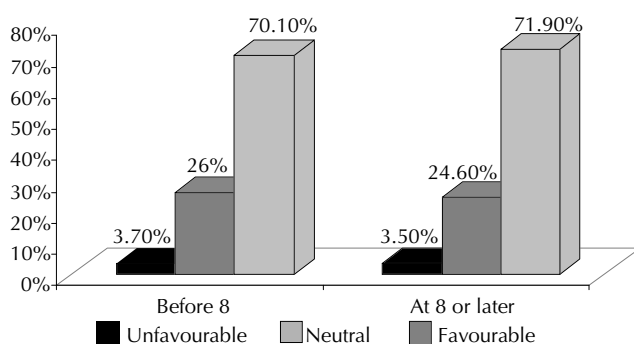


Fig. 4: Effect of the early exposure to English on attitudes towards Basque.

Sl. 4: Vpliv zgodnje izpostavljenosti angleščini na odnos do baskovščine.

The first outstanding fact has to do with the lack of negative attitudes towards Basque (below 3.8%) and the predominance of favourable attitudes (around 70%) in both groups. Furthermore, Figure 3 clearly shows that there is no significant difference in the participants' attitudes towards Basque irrespective of the age at which they started to learn English. This was borne out by the T-test performed which confirmed that there was no statistical difference between these two groups ($p = 0.332$). Therefore, these results seem to run counter to those voices which state that an early learning of English may negatively influence pupils' attitudes towards the minority language. Not only did this early teaching have no negative impact on their attitudes towards Basque, but it also favoured the level of proficiency attained in the foreign language. Thus, those who had started to learn it before the age of 8 considered that their competence was better than those who had learnt it for the first time at the age of 8 or later [$F_{1, 220} = 4.439$ ($p < 0.001$)], whereas curiously enough, no statistically significant differences were observed regarding their attitudes towards English.

CONCLUSIONS

The European Union intends to foster multilingualism as it will benefit all European citizens in the border-free single market, but this situation demands an extra-effort in all European bilingual contexts where a minority language is spoken, such as the Basque Country.

The Basque educational system has turned a monolingual system in which the presence of Basque was forbidden into a bilingual one in just 25 years. Since Basque acquired co-official status with Spanish in 1978, many efforts to revive the language have been made and the outcome has been particularly fruitful in the teaching world. Although the last two decades have seen a steady increase in the number of people who can and do speak Basque in their everyday life, especially among children and young people due to the ever more popular immersion programmes, Basque is still clearly a minority language. This is the reason why, as we have seen in the introduction, the early teaching of English is seen by some people as a potential risk to the maintenance of the minority language.

However, the few research studies available centered on the analysis of this question show that the early introduction of the foreign language has no negative effect on the normal cognitive development and on Basque and Spanish proficiency, whereas, as could be expected, the command of English improves significantly. Moreover, the attitudes towards Basque of those pupils who set out to learn English at the age of four are as favourable as those of the students who learnt it from the age of 8 onwards. Therefore, the conclusion to be drawn is that, although it is obvious that more research studies are needed, the results available so far seem to indicate that early trilingualism does not entail any disadvantage to the minority language, Basque in the Basque Country. Hence, the answer to our initial question would be that English and Basque are complementary languages in the Basque educational system, provided that at least some minimum conditions are met.

Finally, it is worth considering that the Department of Education of the Basque Government has decided to go even further and turn the bilingual system (in Basque and Spanish) into a trilingual one in the short run. In fact, during the 2003–2004 school year twelve trilingual experimental programmes were implemented in secondary education, in which Basque, Spanish and English will be used as means of instruction. These public schools join the private schools which are already carrying out trilingual experiences, but whose academic results are not habitually made public.

One exception is represented by the Federation of Ikastolak, which published recently a paper (Ikastolen Elkarteko Eleanitz-ingelesa taldea, 2003) showing that the teaching of Social Sciences through English does not hinder students from successfully explaining in Basque

the contents they had learnt in the foreign language, while the experimental group's (who was taught in English, their L3) command of the subject matter of Social Sciences was even better than that of the control group (taught in Basque, their L1 or L2). Cenoz (1998) also undertook a study in which the introduction of English as an additional language of instruction in a D model school was analyzed. This author concludes that, as expected, the use of English as a means of instruction has a positive effect on English proficiency and no negative influence on the development of Basque, Spanish and content.

The early learning of the foreign language and the, so far, scarce results available from these pilot programmes seem to indicate that the trilingual experiences are on the right track. If the European educational systems are to meet the trilingual objective set by the European Commission, the teaching of a foreign language as means of instruction seems to become indispensable (Lasagabaster, 2003). However, it seems obvious that there is a need to watch and research these trilingual programmes, so that those who are skeptical about the

potential language improvement in the foreign language and, above all, afraid of the potential negative effects on Basque (or on any other minority language) can be brought round by means of the results obtained in empirical studies. As Beetsma (2002, 9) points out:

Notwithstanding the increasing occurrence and often innovative character of trilingual primary schooling, research into this type of education is in its infancy and systematic knowledge about the phenomenon is not available until now.

There is no doubt that this is the only reasonable conclusion to be reached at this stage, although the results accessible so far allow us to be optimistic.

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BASKOVŠČINA KOT MANJŠINSKI JEZIK IN ANGLEŠČINA KOT TUJI JEZIK: ALI STA JEZIKA ZNOTRAJ BASKOVSKEGA IZOBRAŽEVALNEGA SISTEMA KOMPLEMENTARNA?

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POVZETEK

Evropska komisija se je odločno zavzela za širjenje večjezičnosti in v tem duhu postavila cilj, da naj bi vsak državljan Evrope obvladal vsaj tri evropske jezike. Pot do tega cilja pa bo vendarle še dolga, saj dva tuja jezika trenutno govori zgolj četrtina Evropejcev. Vključevanje dveh tujih jezikov v učni načrt pomeni, da se bodo morali učenci, ki so vključeni v dvojezične izobraževalne sisteme, kot je na primer tisti v Baskiji (Španija), učiti kar štirih jezikov.

Eden od osrednjih ukrepov, ki izhaja iz ideje spodbujanja večjezičnosti, je pomikanje začetka učenja tujih jezikov v zgodnje otroštvo. To odraža tako imenovano konsenzualno stališče, ki je v ozadju širjenja ideje, da učenje tujega jezika od ranih let prinaša boljše obvladanje tega jezika. Pa vendar so se v Baskiji pojavila določena opozorila, da ni trdne osnove, s katero bi lahko upravičili vpeljevanje programov zgodnjega učenja že v vrtce. Da bi nekoliko osvetlili zgornjo polemiko, je v pričujočem članku podana analiza redkih dostopnih raziskav, izvedenih v Baskiji.

V prvi vrsti so v prispevku analizirani vplivi izpostavljenosti angleščini od ranega otroštva na kognitiven razvoj in na normalen razvoj drugih uradnih jezikov v Baskiji (baskovščine in španščine). Nato so skrbno preučena (jezikovna) stališča do vseh treh jezikov v učnem načrtu baskovskih šol (baskovščine, španščine in angleščine kot tujega jezika). Kaže, da rezultati potrjujejo tezo, da zgodnje uvajanje tujega jezika ne vpliva negativno na normalen kognitiven razvoj ali na razvoj obvladovanja baskovščine in španščine, medtem ko se obvladanje angleščine pri tem znatno izboljša. Nadalje, učenci, ki z učenjem angleščine začnejo zgodaj, do baskovščine izkazujejo enako naklonjenost kot tisti, ki se z angleščino srečajo kasneje.

Čeprav je potrebno izvesti še več dodatnih raziskav, lahko na podlagi doslej dostopnih rezultatov zaključimo, da zgodnje uvajanje trojezičnosti nima neugodnega vpliva na učenje manjšinskega jezika, v primeru Baskije torej baskovščine. Ti rezultati bi morali posledično pripomoči k zavračanju domnev o škodljivih učinkih zgodnjega uvajanja učenja tujega jezika.

Ključne besede: trojezičnost, manjšinski jezik, tuj jezik, baskovščina

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