English as a foreign language in the EU
Preliminary analysis of the difference in proficiency levels among the member states

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Abstract
Recent research about languages in the EU has reported that English is the most widely known language besides the mother tongue in the EU member states, and it is also the most widely spoken language at country level in sixteen member states (CoEC 2005; 2006). Also, it has been acknowledged that the number of speakers of English as a foreign language (FL) among the member states is very varied (i.e., The Netherlands and Sweden over 80 per cent, and Italy and Spain under 30 per cent). This article presents a preliminary analysis to explain why these differences occur. Accordingly, we have established a factor taxonomy and identified different factors within four main categories: individual, linguistic, educational and societal. Although we cannot offer in-depth analysis because of extension restrictions and the interdisciplinary nature of the factors, we maintain that societal factors contribute highly to language learning success. In particular, social, historical, economic and demographical characteristics of a country, and its type of television broadcasting, may exert potential influence. This article also warns about the problematic side effects that language inequality may cause for the EU’s consolidation process.

Keywords: learning, foreign language, English, European Union, factors

In January of 2007 in Berlin, 450 delegates from across Europe inaugurated the 2007 European Year of Equal Opportunities for All at the first-ever European Equality summit – a joint initiative by the European Commission and the German Presidency of the EU. One of the key goals was the identification of specific measures to make equal opportunities a reality in Europe. Four key themes were set for the European Year:1

Rights – Raising awareness of the right to equality and non-discrimination and of the problem of multiple discrimination.
Representation – Stimulating debate on ways to increase the participation of groups in society which are victims of discrimination and to achieve a balanced participation of men and women.

Recognition – Facilitating and celebrating diversity and equality.
Respect – Promoting a more cohesive society.

No mention was made of the influence that language development entails in the process of social cohesion and the provision of equal opportunities for mobility across the European Union. These issues have not been ignored by some researchers. For instance, Symigné (2003: 54) observes that “more and more workers want to take advantage of the integrated labour market and find jobs in the neighbouring countries”. Also, Tassinopoulos and Werner (1999: 7) point out that the development of language skills is clearly one of the most important factors that affect labour movement, and they make clear that “in the EU […] cultural and language differences still exist and act as barriers to international mobility”. Considering that “inner EU mobility increasingly becomes a migration of the highly skilled workers” (14), international mobility is becoming socially unequal, and the influence of language is creating a first- and a second-class EU citizenship. The European Commission has recently reported this concern (CoEC Press Service 2009: 1): “Parliament […] draws attention to the fact that the lack of language skills continues to be a serious obstacle to the social and labour market integration of non-national workers in many Member States”.

In addition, Pennycook (1994), Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (1999), Carrasquillo and Rodríguez (2008), Blackledge (2009), and Mahboog and Lipovsky (2009), among others, foresee the problematic side effects that language globalisation may cause for social and power equality. It cannot be argued that language and society function interdependently (Hewings and Hewings 2005; Agha 2007; Antos and Ventola 2008). In this article we argue that, concretely, English language use can seriously affect the achievement of the European Commission’s goals mentioned above. If this matter is not seriously addressed, the proper consolidation process of the EU may be at risk.

We consider specifically the English language because it is the main vehicle for communication in business, academia, and many other different spheres of social activity in the world (e.g. Kachru 1992; Berns 1995a; Crystal 2003; Renkema 2004; Benwell and Stokoe 2006; Mahboog and Lipovsky 2009). This does not mean that we neglect multilingualism in Europe and the European Commission’s goal of achieving equal status for the native language together with two other foreign languages (CoEC Press Service 2009: 1). It is one thing to study the role of a language in society, as we intend to do here, and quite another to consider political and cultural issues of cohesiveness by taking language as a standpoint, for example the debate about monolingualism versus multilingualism in Europe, which has drawn much attention lately (e.g. Ginsburg and Weber 2005;
Auer and Li 2007; Teichmann and de Vries 2009). In this paper we focus on language learning and seek to understand why some countries achieve successful or unsuccessful rates of language learning. One of the main problems that we identify is a lack of empirical research. In Bartram’s words, “few studies have ventured a precise disentanglement of these factors, perhaps because attempts to measure the precise significance of the interconnected variables may be something of a questionable undertaking […]” (2006: 212). Also, space restrictions only allow a general analysis, and consequently the influence of the various factors in language learning cannot be grounded sufficiently in our discussion.

Despite these obstacles, such research is both necessary and pressing, given the significance that language inequality may suppose to the EU’s consolidation process, and with this paper we hope to motivate researchers to consider this issue and remedy this lacuna with further studies.

The factors affecting foreign language learning

There are diverse assumptions that seek to explain how FL learning occurs and to identify the factors that influence that process. Broadly speaking, these factors are classified by whether they are external or internal to the learner. For instance, Thélot (1997) identifies three main category factors: external, student and school factors. It is not our purpose here to discuss the nature or rationale of those classifications, but to understand the influence those factors may imply. After taking into consideration previous classifications in language acquisition studies (Cook 2001; Krashen 2003; Lightbown and Spada 2006; Mitchell and Myles 2006; VanPatten and Williams 2007), we have identified four categories: individual, linguistic, educational and societal, including the following sub-factors set out in Table 1.

Although other sub-factors may be added to this list, it serves us as a general framework for analysis. The first category factor, individual factors, cannot be included for discussion. Although individual factors play a significant role in the process of FL learning (e.g. Skehan 1989; Foley 2004; Cohen and Macaro 2007), we can assume that citizens in any one country or context have the same aptitude or are equally genetically endowed to learn a language as others in a different context.

Conversely, linguistic similarity seems to exert a considerable influence and facilitate language learning, if we take various contexts into consideration. If we look at the data offered by the European Commission (CoEC 2005; 2006), the number of speakers of English as a FL is mostly higher in those countries whose
language is of Germanic origin or shares linguistic characteristics with English. Supporting data appears in Table 2.

Although these results are based on self-reports and cultures may differ greatly in how they judge their own knowledge of languages, the data gives a clear picture of the unequal situation. As we can observe in Table 1, there is a considerable difference between languages of Latin and Slavic (or other) origin and those of Germanic or Scandinavian origin. Although some linguists may claim that “from a lexical point of view, English is more a Romance than a Germanic language” (Crystal 2003: 6), Latinate lexis is mostly used in formal speech (Bryson 1990), and it is not so prominent in the type of discourse used for everyday conversation. The influence of linguistic similarity facilitating language learning can also be seen in many other instances. For example, data from the European Commission states that most Italian students choose Spain for Erasmus exchanges, and most Spanish students choose Italy.² Apart from the attractions that both countries offer, the fact that language is not a barrier seems a decisive factor for them to feel confident to study abroad; most stu-


### Table 1. Factors that influence foreign language learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual category</th>
<th>Personality</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aptitude and intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Affective factors</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cognitive factors</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic category (similarity between native and foreign languages)</td>
<td>Phonology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Syntax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexis and morphology</td>
<td>Semantics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational category</td>
<td>Classroom methodology (teaching methods, programmes and curricula, treatment of speaking, materials)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher training (pre-service, in-service)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total instruction time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Societal category (background and characteristics of the country)</td>
<td>History/culture/traditions/social beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Economic development and budget for education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of users of the native language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of users of the foreign language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Form of film broadcasting (subtitling/captioning or dubbing)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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students are able to master the target language in a short time. Notwithstanding, as is demonstrated later in this article, other factors can have a greater influence if we observe that some countries of non-Germanic origin have also shown (relative) language learning success, such as Finland (63 per cent) or Greece (48 per cent) (CoEC 2006).

Although the strong influence of linguistic similarity can hardly be neglected, no political or educational action can be taken with this inherent factor to increase the number of speakers of English as a FL. In other words, to study the influence that a language exerts on another may help to understand the difficulties of FL learning and to partly justify why the number of speakers is higher or lower, but it is in the educational and societal sphere where possible actions can be taken to develop FL learning policies.

Educational factors, such as classroom methodology, teachers’ pre- and in-service training and number of hours of instruction are usually considered important factors to promote FL learning. It is logical to suppose that the longer learners are exposed to a FL, the more learning takes place (Muñoz 2001; Young and Sachdev 2007; Liddicoat and Curnow 2009), because “increased class time and early learning would give students more exposure to the language” (Kettemann 1997: 36). However, comparative measures among mainstream compulsory educational systems in Europe show, for instance, that students in Sweden spend about the same amount of class time as Spanish students (790 and 800 hours respectively (Eurydice 2003)), and the number of speakers of English as a FL in Sweden is 89 per cent, and only 27 per cent in Spain (CoEC 2006).

Table 2. Sample of speakers of English as a foreign language in the EU, with language origin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language origin</th>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Users of English as a FL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germanic</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This circumstance is also seen in many other cases, such as Greek and French students; whereas the former receive a total of 657 hours of instruction with 48 per cent of the population claiming to speak English, the latter receive 828 hours with only 36 per cent of the population making the same claims (Eurydice 2003). It can obviously be inferred here that other factors might have a greater influence on language learning.

Appropriate classroom methodology is claimed by many practitioners as crucial for developing communicative abilities. When we refer to appropriate methodology, we mean teaching practices that keep a balance in the development of all skills; and we consider language learning not only a linguistic issue but also an intercultural experience, or an opportunity for interpersonal interaction. Classroom practice privileges some elements as paramount for the development of communicative language ability: time dedicated to developing the speaking skill; the type of oral activities (if meant for communication or not); opportunities for students’ movement during oral interaction; consideration of error treatment (whether focused on fluency or accuracy); the use of the FL in class; and evaluation procedures (Rubio and Schwarzer 2010). Also, apart from the teaching methods and practices, there are two factors that influence the quality of instruction: first, teachers’ language abilities; and second, teachers’ knowledge of techniques and management procedures to develop speaking in the classroom. Research into the different methodological approaches that exist in the member states should be conducted to acknowledge the contexts in which the former classroom practice procedures are accomplished.

Teacher training is regarded by some specialists as the main factor in achieving learning success. In Melgarejo’s (2006) study to investigate why Finland has held the best world-ranking positions according to PISA reports of reading comprehension and other abilities for the last fifteen years, Melgarejo concludes that the main factor is pre-service teacher training. High academic achievements are required of graduates who apply to enter tertiary studies, and considerably more time is allocated to theoretical classes and practicums than is the case in other countries. Relevant to this line of inquiry, it should be pointed out that over the last three decades, educational policies relating to multilingual language policy drawn up by the Board of Education have consistently placed much emphasis on foreign languages as part of all education in Finland. Concretely, immersion programmes and CLIL (Content Language Integrated Learning) has definitively promoted foreign language learning in Finland (Buchberger 2002). Furthermore, in the case of the English language, early language exposure (in kindergarten) is also required for enrolment in some Finnish bilingual schools.
Within the educational realm, research has also been directed to curriculum development. Although the Council of Europe’s Framework is “of great use as a conceptual reference tool” in recent years (Takala 1997: 37), the different curricula used in the member states need consolidation. In addition to this, there seems to be a gap between what official curricula demand and actual teaching practices. The main objectives of the curriculum advocate the development of language ability for communication, specifying not only linguistic competences but also socio-cultural and pragmatic ones; but in many contexts this does not seem to be accomplished, so that, for instance, written skills are favoured over oral skills. Furthermore, even though language textbooks, which are the main guide for teachers (in fact 97 per cent of the teachers use the textbook in Spain and France (Alabau 1997)), usually keep a balance in the development of both declarative knowledge (vocabulary and grammar) and non-declarative knowledge (listening, speaking, reading and writing), for some reason many teachers neglect the development of speaking skills in the classroom. We found some evidence for this when interviewing Erasmus students for placement language levels during the last decade. Taking this into consideration, the teachers’ choice of methodology is then a key element that may influence language learning.

Assessment is also observed as an important element in the process of language learning (Takala 1997). As Takala points out, “oral skills should be part of [acquisition], not only in the curriculum, but also of the assessment programs”. Time limitations and implementation costs may explain their exclusion in many contexts. In some countries, such as Spain, most students finish compulsory education without ever having taken an oral exam. Moreover, the English exam that prospective Spanish university students take is only written, and most teachers only tend to focus on written skills in the previous two years before entering university.

Societal factors affecting foreign language learning

The evidence that the average number of English FL speakers is different in each country or region reveals that those factors that are related to a particular society might be decisive (Gillies 2008; Bueno González and Nieto García 2009; McGregor 2009). A societal category would comprise culture, traditions, social beliefs, budget for education, and demographic profile, with history playing a decisive role (Agha 2007; Hua, Seedhouse, Li and Cook 2007). For example, the Spanish dictatorship state (1936–1975) prevented much contact with foreign countries, and French was the only FL taught in schools. These might explain
to a great degree why a very high percentage of Spanish senior citizens are not able to speak English nowadays (76 per cent 45–54 years old; 86 per cent 55–64 years old; 95 per cent over 65 years old (CIS 2007). Also, the linguistic policy of the Fascist regime in Italy during the first half of the twentieth century, which included a linguistic purism, led to a sense of hostility and xenophobia towards the American culture and its language (Pulcini 1997).

Traditions also have an impact on language learning. Although the following picture is not very exact, it serves to explain this point. Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian countries seem to have a very old tradition for oral communication, and this can still be seen in classrooms, where oral practice for native and non-native learning is strongly present. In contrast, Mediterranean countries are less pragmatic and more conceptually oriented (Alvarez 2003), which would explain why there is a major focus on written abilities in classrooms. To take for granted the implication of oral or written traditions for FL classroom instruction is not legitimate, but it is commonly seen that the written tradition is stronger in some countries, such as France or Italy, than in others, such as Sweden or Belgium.

Culture refers to “patterns of values and beliefs that evolve from a group’s distinctive interpretation of human experience” (Berns 1995b: 26). Some specialists in the field, such as Berns (1992: 10), recognise that “the communicative competence desirable for learners to achieve also depends upon the social and cultural context in which the language is used”. The sociolinguistic profile of a country then influences the production of needs, attitudes and motivation for language learning. For instance, in the Netherlands it is assumed that English must be learned apart from Dutch. It is something everyone complies with from an early age and can be characterised as part of their culture. Quite the opposite occurs in other countries, mainly in southern and eastern Europe. In Italy, for instance, even though society acknowledges the importance of being able to speak English, a low number of Italians speak it, because English is not so much a social need but a means to find better job opportunities. The same circumstance occurs in Spain. Some researchers argue that Spaniards are not very interested in learning English because Spanish is an international language that is spoken in many parts of the world. All this is congruent with some data that shows that the United Kingdom holds the lowest number of FL speakers in Europe (according to European Commission 2005: 3, only 30 per cent of the population in the UK assert that they can speak at least one other language in addition to their mother tongue). The number of users of the language is then a

3. Cf., for instance, INCE (Instituto Nacional de Calidad y Educación) (1997), in which 88 per cent of Spanish teenagers expressed the view that learning English would be important to finding a job.
factor that can have a considerable influence on the population’s development of a social belief and a motivation to learn the FL. Nordic countries, for instance, whose languages are not used in an international context, can be considered bilingual and belong to the expanding circle of English speaking countries (Crystal 2003). Small countries, or those with minority language users, such as Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Luxembourg, have a very high number of FL speakers. Obviously, their location with respect to the neighbouring languages would make the citizens choose a particular FL, English being now the commonest FL studied (Crystal 2003; CoEC 2005).

Within the societal category we also include the social conception of language. If learners do not understand English as an important social practice that will allow them to communicate in different contexts, it is very likely that in the educational domain communicative activities are not regarded as true interaction, but simply as linguistic exchanges.

Although we live in a globalised world, in which everyone seems to share in part the same context of culture, the different contexts of situations inside that general context may be understood in a different way in different EU countries. Consequently, this would explain why there are different attitudes towards learning a FL, its native speakers, its culture and the social value of learning a different language, which goes together with learning a different culture. For example, if classrooms in Spain and Denmark are compared, it can be observed that Danish students use English as a natural way of communication, whereas Spanish students have a tendency to use Spanish to communicate in FL classrooms. These behaviours help to understand that spoken communication is greatly influenced by the immediate context, i.e., it is context-embedded because most of the oral exchanges people engage in are not pre-planned.

Social attitude to language is another societal factor. Research analysing the influence of attitudes to language learning from a social-psychological perspective has a long tradition (e.g. Gardner and Lambert 1972, Gardner 1985; Jones Diaz and Harvey 2007). For instance, parental influence upon learner attitudes is significant (Bartram 2006). In Bartram’s study, carried out in England, Germany and the Netherlands, a positive correlation was found between the achieving of language proficiency and the parents’ positive attitudes, knowledge of the FL and the construction of the children’s understandings of language importance, utility and status.

Language teaching should imply understanding language as a social entity that establishes a connection between language and social context. Actually, “to teach social and cultural awareness” is one of the primary concerns to increase teachers’ efficiency” (Kettemann 1997: 37). Thus, the context in which
the teaching and learning process takes place needs to be considered for three main reasons (Edelsky 2006: 67): “(1) learning language in school (whether or not in a bilingual program) always happens in multiple co-occurring contexts; (2) each of these contexts has profound effects on writing inside the classroom; and (3) the contexts are complex in ways that may not be immediately obvious”.

Finally, television broadcasting of films in the original version is considered a major facilitator for FL learning by many language experts, whether as a classroom tool or at home. We argue here, in addition, that watching television programmes in the original version, captioned or subtitled, should considerably benefit success in FL learning. In fact, those countries where American films or other English-speaking programmes are shown captioned or subtitled have a high number of FL speakers of English. When someone is watching a foreign-language film that is not dubbed, incidental learning occurs, which is characterised by a non-conscious or non-systematic effort to process the language (van de Poel and d’Ydewalle 1999), something that has been repeatedly regarded as paramount for effective language acquisition (Krashen 1982; McLaughlin 1987). As Danan (2004: 73) reports from Koostra and Beentjes’ study with children learning English, “high frequency of subtitled television viewing at home proved to be a more significant factor on performance results” for language learning (1999: 56–58).

Research also shows that watching video alone has limitations and that pedagogical effectiveness is enhanced through captioning or subtitling (Baltova 1994: 516). Despite inconsistent reports that suggest that subtitles obstruct the linguistic and cultural comprehension of the film (Blakely 1984), many studies confirm the positive learning effects of both productive and receptive skills (verbatim recall and retention, reuse of vocabulary in the proper context, etc.; Vanderplank 1988: 276; Baltova 1999: 38; Garza 1991: 245; Borras and Lafayette 1994: 63, 65, 68; Neuman and Koskinen 1992: 102 (in Danan 2004); Bird and Williams 2002). Furthermore, optimal use of captions or subtitles is closely related to building successful learning strategies (Danan 2004: 74). Vanderplank, in one of his empirical studies, noted that “subjects who came from countries where regular subtitling is the norm were most adept at quickly developing strategies to take advantage of captioning” (1988: 275; see Danan 2004: 75).

The following countries in the EU subtitle foreign programmes: Belgium (Flanders only), Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Sweden, the United Kingdom. Spain, France, Italy, Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland are some of the countries that dub foreign programmes; it is striking that all of these have a low percentage of speakers of English as a FL. Even Germany (56 per cent) has a much
lower number of English speakers than other countries whose language is of
Germandic origin or bears a linguistic similarity (e.g. Sweden 89 per cent; the
Netherlands 87 per cent). An interesting fact arises in Portugal, which resem-
bles Spain and Italy in linguistic origin, culture and other aspects, except for
film broadcasting. Despite having only 32 per cent of speakers of English as a FL
(CoEC 2006), it is very well known from anecdotal evidence that the oral level
in Portugal is much higher than in Spain or Italy. This needs to be investigated.
Also, the case of Greece offers valuable information to account for the relevance
of film broadcasting as an important factor for language learning. Although
Greek is a non-Germanic language, and Greece also shares many similarities
in culture and education with Italy and Spain, percentages of FL speakers are
double (48 per cent). Another interesting piece of data is that the British under-
stand colloquial American English better than the Americans understand Brit-
ish colloquial English, since the Americans rarely watch British programming.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to highlight the state of English learning as a foreign lan-
guage in the EU, with the hope of opening a new line of research which ultimate-
ly would provide more equal opportunities for labour and study mobility, and
would inhibit the development of first- and second-rate European citizenship.

In order to explain why some member states have a high or a low number
of speakers, we have first classified the factors that intervene in the process
of language learning. We have identified the following categories and factors:
individual (personality, aptitude/intelligence, affective, cognitive, sex, and age);
linguistic (phonology, syntax, lexis/morphology, semantics); educational (class-
room methodology, teacher training, total instruction time); and societal (his-
tory/culture/traditions, social beliefs, budget for education, number of users of
the native language, number of users of the foreign language, and form of film
broadcasting). In a second step, we have analysed these factors, and have argued
that acquiring English as a FL can be a matter of societal influence, rather than
individual, educational or linguistic influence. The historical, cultural, and social
background of a country, the number of users of the native language, and tele-
vision broadcasting may be strong predictors for successful language learning.
Evidence has been found from the profiles of different countries, such as Sweden
or the Netherlands, with rates of more than 80 per cent of the population claim-
ing to be able to hold a normal conversation in English (CoEC 2005; 2006).
Among societal factors, the following might be decisive for language learning:
an old tradition of emphasis on oral communication; low numbers of native language speakers; broadcasting English-speaking television programmes in the form of subtitling or captioning; and social attitudes towards the use of the FL. Although linguistic similarity to English has been regarded as an important factor, evidence from countries whose language is not Germanic, such as Greece (48 per cent), or Finland (63 per cent), that use subtitling, and countries such as Germany (56 per cent), or Austria (58 per cent), that do not use subtitling for television broadcasting, support the hypothesis that societal factors have a dominant influence on the favouring of FL learning. To conclude, Borrell’s words serve to highlight one of the main arguments of this paper: “an increased use of subtitling instead of dubbing in Europe could lead to an increased understanding of languages throughout Europe, and thus to a better understanding between European peoples” (Borell 2000: 76).

The strong influence of social attitudes towards the FL in classroom instruction has been acknowledged too, also resulting in a disposition to favour oral language use. The authors of this article have also highlighted the importance of considering a FL as a social tool in the process of learning, where language is used for a communicative purpose according to the users’ intention of meaning and context variation. When a society perceives a FL as an instrument for social communication, the learning of the language is enhanced throughout by intercultural awareness and more positive attitudes. In this sense, the beliefs and the social and cultural backgrounds of the teachers and learners are crucial in the learning process of a FL and its culture.

In the educational field, we have also considered pre-service teacher training and teaching practices. The former is a key element in providing competent professionals and the latter an aspect to be investigated. As a matter of fact, the authors of this article question whether many teaching practices aimed at developing speaking in many contexts are appropriate. CLIL has been regarded as an effective method of favouring language learning, taking into consideration the educational results found in Finland.

This paper has also acknowledged several limitations in the analysis of the factors identified. The interrelated and multidisciplinary nature of the factors impedes the setting of achievable parameters of analysis, and together with space limitations prevents us from providing a better substantiation of our arguments. Although we have pointed out that “attempts to measure the precise significance of the interconnected variables may be something of a questionable undertaking…” (Bartram 2006: 212), we still think that scientific research can be feasibly conducted to study the degree of interrelationship of the factors. For instance, a comparative analysis of independent studies of the factors,
where quantitative and qualitative data are analysed, can be done to cast light on this enigma. If societal factors are confirmed to be the strongest predictors for language learning, specific political and educational policies can be carried out. In further studies, it should also be necessary to include for analysis the new member states in the EU from Eastern Europe, so as to have a more complete picture. We hope that this preliminary analysis motivates researchers to conduct further analyses and studies on this pressing subject.

**Works cited**


Résumé

Les recherches récentes sur les langues dans l’UE confirment que l’anglais est la langue la plus connue, à côté de la langue maternelle dans les États-membres. Il est aussi la langue étrangère la plus utilisée dans seize de ces pays (CoEC 2005; 2006). On a reconnu que le nombre de locuteurs de l’anglais langue étrangère est très variable selon le pays (par ex : plus de 80 pour cent au Pays-Bas et en Suède, moins de 30 pour cent en Italie ou en Espagne). Cet article présente une analyse préliminaire pour expliquer comment ces différences existent. Nous avons donc adopté une taxonomie des facteurs, que nous avons groupés en quatre catégories principales : facteurs individuels, linguistiques, éducatifs et sociaux. Bien que l’analyse approfondie soit exclue dans le cadre d’un article court, nous postulons que les facteurs sociaux contribuent largement au succès dans l’apprentissage des langues. En particulier, les caractères sociaux, historiques, économiques et démographiques d’un pays, ainsi que son type d’émissions de télévision, peuvent exercer une influence potentielle. Cet article avertit aussi que les effets problématiques de l’inégalité linguistique peuvent nuire au processus d’intégration européenne.

Mots clés : apprentissage, langue étrangère, anglais, Union européenne, facteurs