

Learning Foreign Languages - The European experience

A Herman perspective and some thoughts about the Korean way

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요 약

한 국가나 국민들이 세계화를 추진하려면 다른 문화권과의 접촉을 통해 외부세계를 바르게 이해해야 한다. 외국어가 기술, 지식, 정보시대를 창출 전달하는 핵심적인 요인이자 매체수단이기 때문에 외국어 학습의 중요성은 전 영역에서 매우 중요한 위치를 차지하고 있다. 이러한 분위기에서 세계어인 영어는 여러나라에서 이미 공용어로 사용하는 정책을 세우기까지 한다.

최근 유럽에도 마스트리히트 조약에 의하여 EU 국가 소속 학생들이 적어도 3개 국어를 말하고 쓸 수 있도록 언어교육을 지원하고 있다. 이웃 나라들의 다양한 문화, 경제, 사회, 종교의 중요성은 유럽에서 언어가 학습되어지는 매우 중요하고도 기본적인 요소이기 때문이다.

언어가 21세기의 다 언어사회에서 특별한 지위를 누리지만 두 언어 내지 다 언어사용이 증가하고 있는 지역에서는 단일언어(영어)사용보다는 지역언어가 비즈니스의 주요언어가 되는 경향이 있다.

따라서 필자는 유럽국가에서 사용되어지고 있는 언어들의 소개와 독일인들의 외국어 학습

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에 관한 경험, 그리고 한국의 외국어 교육환경의 개선을 논의함으로써 한국의 외국어 교육의 정상화, 실용화와 세계화 향상에 자극이 되었으면 한다.

I . Language learning in general

"Language learning is a drag and languages are something of a bore, because there is no real test of their capacities in Korea. Since I have come here in June I have noticed that everybody talks about English, but the language in which this expressed is Korean. When I am in town, I hardly ever see a foreign face, when I travel around I never see other foreigners, what is therefore the use of foreign languages there is no chance to try them out."

II . Knowing the language of your customer

We all know that this is a stereotype which can only survive if we only rely on eyes and ears and ears exclusively, if we, however, try to look under the surface of things we shall quickly notice that Korea is pretty much depending on its foreign trade and that Korea is as globally entangled as any state in Europe (and it is for that matter quite solidly entangled with Europe itself: according to the Commerce-Industry-Energy Ministry, two thirds of all inbound investments come from the EU, which also accounts for about half of Korea's trade!) And foreign trade and global networks are based on communication and communication may be based on the English language more than ever, but knowing the language of the customer which automatically means knowing something about his culture gives a salesman the cutting edge he needs in comparison to his competitors: If you are buying goods, you need not bother much about the language of the person you buy from, because this is the task of the person who wants to sell things.

III . Various thoughts about language learning

On the basis of such experiences it becomes quite clear that any European country (much as Korea for that matter!) has to come to terms with a language policy which satisfies the needs of her partner countries and of the partner communities (here, the European Union!) at large.

So what are the various thoughts about language learning in this contest and what is the role of the various languages in this concert of ideas?

As to myself, being German, I should mainly talk about the German language, even the more so, since I am working for the Goethe-Institut, a German Cultural Organization, which is 100%

financed by the German government and which plans, mediates and arranges contacts between cultures in 80 countries through 160 institutes.

IV. The European (language) map

Let's look at the map of the EU (it's 15 member states) and at the language map of Europe first: Who speaks which language in which numbers? What are the official language policies? What will happen in the future?

There are approximately 80 different languages in Europe, 11 of which are used as official EU languages (see maps in Appendix.) The German language, which is one of them, is spoken by approximately 100 million Europeans as their mother tongue, it has an official status in seven Europe countries, which makes German the most frequently spoken mother tongue in Europe.

18% of all youngsters in Europe learn German, In Middle and Eastern Europe, with more than 9 million learners of German alone (out of a total of 18 million world wide) the German language has taken second place after English and rules the first place in vocationally oriented schools and universities.

V. Who cares about German?

18 million learners, you may ask, is that supposed to be many, considering the current decrease of a world wide interest in German? Isn't the English language on the move instead? Who cares if Leonardo da Vinci speaks German, if Sandra Bullock learns German, if Michael Douglas declared his first love in German, and what difference does it make that Chelsea Clinton is one of the 18 million learners of German or that President Wahid in Indonesia, or the Russian, the Uruguayan President, Korean, Japanese and French intellectuals master the German language quite well - as long as German ranks as language number eleven world wide, whereas the first places are taken by English, Spanish, Russian, Hindi, Indonesian and Arabic?

VI. Foreign students in Germany

But there are currently many foreign students in Germany, who learn and use the German language for their studies (certainly also, because there are no study fees in Germany, yet!) :

5000 from Korea, 2000 from Japan, 2000 from Indonesia, 1500 from Taiwan, 1500 from

Vietnam - to name just the Asian component. Many of the Asian students see Germany as a potential hub between east and west - as some economic observers remarked.

VII. Learning the languages of your neighbours!

As said before, it is mainly the economic importance of Germany which creates the major motive for the learning of this language, Germany has 14 neighbours with different languages and it is used as a highly important area for transit and an junction for the exchange of goods within the EU.

Neighbourhood and various regions of cultural importance are the most eminent bases for language learning in Europe. Bilingual studies and exchange programmes or language training for tradesmen help secure the mutual experience of crossing borders on a daily scale.

Europe unification is an essential consequence of neighbourhood life!

VIII. Europe language learning concepts? Yes and no!

and yet, there are no legally binding concepts for language learning in Europe, even though the Maastricht Treaty supports and proclaims the learning of the languages of the European member states.

In spite of the fact that language learning on primary school basis of receptive multilingual knowledge have been widely explained and are widely accepted as general denominators, a few words may be said about these two internationally acclaimed experiences:

IX. Learning languages at a very young age!

It seems quite obvious that learning is child's play, if taught at a very early age, even in kindergarten, as long as this happens in a total immersion situation. Languages should be learnt early rather than late, mainly because of psychological and didactical reasons.

"The earlier children begin learning foreign languages, the better their progress tends to be. The chances of creating a Europe of multilingual citizens will be greatly improved if citizens have access to language learning at primary school of before." (The European Commission. Documents on Languages)

X. Multilingual comprehension

The receptive multilingual idea, simply referred to as " multilingual comprehension" includes the thought that some languages can be traced back to common language sources, which in Europe are mainly of Germanic or Romanic origins. German can be considered helpful in terms of vocabulary and structure when looking at English and Scandinavian languages, which are all part of the Germanic language root, Latin can be considered even more helpful in terms of vocabulary when looking at Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and French.

Once, these Basic languages have been learnt, the derived languages need only be learned on a receptive, listening, comprehending basis, not necessarily on an active, performing one, because the partners in communication can be expected to understand the conversation passively or rather receptively as well. Let's say, a speaker of Italian talks to a speaker of Swedish and the first one has studied Germanic sources and the latter one Latin sources then they should both be able to use their mother tongues and yet understand each other sufficiently well in return.

XI. Nationalism in the EU and the compulsory learning of two languages

Back to the nationalistic feelings of single member states: They are often still too strong to consider variety as enrichment rather than as competition, this is probably why the suggestion of France to install two compulsory foreign languages in all European curricula was rejected by the EU bureaucracy. The promotion of two foreign languages as compulsory languages like Spanish and Italian as fully fledged subjects and not as exotic optional language cases. Foreign language policy starts within the country and can only be measured in terms of the promotion of other languages in the country in question. Language competition within the European Union is also responsible for the monopoly of the English language as the sole language competitor.

XII. Korea's new curriculum for LOTE (Languages other than English)

Korea follows a new curriculum for second foreign languages which is mainly oriented on neighbourhood and economics, two criteria which we have also found in Europe. Even a third one, the receptive multilingual ability (multilingual comprehension) seems to be given, if we consider a language like Chinese as a basis for Korean and Japanese and if we consider them relatives of Korean under the umbrella of the " Altai Languages"

And yet, the terms and conditions are quite different:

Approximately 1600 teachers of Japanese stand next to 20 teachers of Russian and 2-- teachers of Chinese, 60 teachers of Spanish stand next to 700 teachers of French and 1200 teachers of German, whose numbers have both decreased by 28% over the last years.

But not only the comparison of numbers is relevant, it seems that the free option of students and schools (Hakbuje) for and of these languages will obstruct any long term official policy.

Even more problematic is the lack of seriousness as to the actual teaching of any of these languages, if we exclude the foreign languages schools for a moment: How can anyone learn a foreign language in three years, given that the weekly teaching hours comprise only one of two language lessons.

Even the so called easy languages need more than two hundred and fifty hours studying on average to be of any effect. The average foreign student in a German Goethe-Institut needs approximately 400 hours in his or her German environment in order to be able to converse on a very simple basis.

XIII. Final remarks

Which means, all the efforts of teaching a foreign language in Korea are in doubt, unless the number of language lessons per week will be increased.

Maybe the aspect of early language learning in primary schools might also enhance the faster perception of second foreign languages in Korea.

I certainly hope that these few remarks on language learning in Europe made my listeners slightly more conscious of this, we can say "International" problem and also slightly more self critical as to the language policies in this country.

Thank you for listening! Let's now open the discussion on the topic of language learning in Europe or anything else I touched upon, if you feel like it!