Chapter Ten

The Emergence of English as the Common Language in Higher Education

1. Introduction

The English language is becoming the global language of communication in technology, trade, culture, science and education. There are about a dozen languages in the world that serve as (sub)continental central languages, languages that operate as third language of communication in their region. According to De Swaan (1998 a, 65) “in this constellation of moons circling planets, and planets circling around suns, one language is at the galactic center, in the midst of a dozen solar systems: this center of the linguistic galaxy is, of course, English.” Also according to De Swaan (1998 b, 118), this export of the English language is related to the position of its language and culture in the global network of cultural exchange, in itself a function of the global military, political, economic and cultural hegemony of the United States of America and before that of the United Kingdom. Fishman (1998-99, 27) also argues that “languages have risen and fallen with the military, economic, cultural, or religious powers that supported them.” He believes that the English language will eventually lose its present dominance because it is spoken only by a small minority, that globalisation will stimulate the emergence of other regional languages and that a counterbalancing effect of localisation and local-language revival is taking place.

Although it is difficult to look into the long–term future, and although the three points mentioned by Fishman are correct observations, they are not valid as arguments for the future waning influence of English. As De Swaan (1998 a, 64) points out, the fact that only a small minority is speaking English is not relevant. In medieval Europe, the fact that “a major proportion of speakers who were competent in more than one language spoke Latin”, was crucial for the influence of Latin, and that is even more the case for English today. The emergence of other regional languages, which have the role of central languages in their (sub)continents is also not valid. What would be relevant would be the rise of a new hegemonic political and economic power related to another language that which would be able to overthrow English. The fact that potential future dominant cultures (such as Chinese, Spanish, Arabic) are using English more and more as their second language of communication, makes it more difficult for these languages to take over as the dominant world language of communication. As far as the emergence of localisation and local languages is concerned, it is more likely that these will have a strengthening impact on the role of English as the global language of communication. Instead of using the dominant language of the surrounding region and elite, speakers of such local languages will be more inclined to use English as their second language of communication.92

Opposition to the use of a second language as the language of communication, is generally, however, extremely strong, for the following reasons: the potential threat to and

---

92 Fishman (1998-99, 37) himself gives an example to illustrate this: “For many Tamils – who maintain frosty relations with the central authorities in Delhi – English seems less like a colonial language than does Hindi.”
perhaps disappearance of the local language; the related danger of the disappearance of local cultural practices and products; and the fear for cultural and linguistic hegemony and imperialism (De Swaan, 1998 b, 110). Fishman (1998-99, 32) relates the prevalence of local languages to authenticity, "a central core of cultural beliefs and interpretations, that are not only resistant to globalization but are actually reinforced by the 'threat' that globalization seems to present to these historical values."

Will the growing dominance of English mean that national languages disappear? According to Fishman (1998-99, 35), "regionalisation and globalisation require that more and more speakers and readers of local languages be multiliterate", with each language having "its own distinctive function." There are according to De Swaan (1998 b, 122) "no signs of abandonment or neglect of the indigenous language" and the same appears to be true in the cultural sphere.

At the same time British English or American English will become less dominant. "Spoken English acquires strong regional idiosyncracies", says Fishman (1998-99, 38), and gradually we can see the same happening to written English. English emerges as a second, third or 'a sometime tongue', used for occupational or educational purposes (Ibid., 35-36). English as a language of teaching and learning also becomes more local-specific, as Raman Sigh of the American College of Greece noted in a presentation with the provocative title 'Whose English is it, anyway?'.

The growing dominance of English as the language of communication is certainly apparent in science and higher education (Bollag, 2000). In the domain of research, it is an accepted fact that scientific publications have to be written or translated into English to get published, acknowledged and cited (Altbach, 1988). However, also in the domain of teaching, the emergence of English as the second language of instruction in addition to the local language seems to be becoming more and more widespread. Opposition to the use of English for scientific purposes has always been marginal, but in the area of teaching has been stronger, both in developing countries such as Malaysia and in continental Europe. At present opposition appears to fade away, even in countries such as Japan and France, which have a strong national cultural identity (Bollag, 2000).

2. Teaching in English in the Netherlands: a case study

A case study of the development of teaching in English in the Netherlands illustrates this. Over the past ten years, a lively debate has taken place on the use of English in teaching at institutions of higher education.

In this debate it was largely ignored that at the so called international higher education institutes, such as the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) and the International Institute for Aerial Survey and Earth Science (ITC), which train students from developing countries, and at the private business school Nijenrode, teaching in the English language had already been common practice for many years. The history of international education in the Netherlands goes back to the beginning of the 1950s. An account of that period by the director of NUFFIC, H. Quik in 1970 (NUFFIC, 1970, 2), describes the situation as follows: "At that time it had already become clear that an active policy directed at attracting foreigners for normal study at our universities was not

---

93 Raman Sigh, The American College of Greece, presentation at Conference 'The International University: Local and global roles, Richmond, the American International University in London, April 3-5, 1998.
Internationalisation of Higher Education

justified, even if it had any chance of being successful. Factors to be considered in this respect were the language difficulties (Dutch of course is not a world language), coupled with the facts that the system and classification of study, the system of degrees, and the duration of the university courses are different in an important way from those, for example, of the Anglo-Saxon countries. ” For that reason, a number of institutes were founded after 1950 to provide training for students from developing countries. The characteristics of their programmes of education and research were and still are strongly directed to the development process, at post-graduate level and using English as the common language.

Until the mid 1980s, the rationales for the establishment of these institutes as described by Quick have continued to dominate international education in the Netherlands and deferred both the national government and regular institutions of higher education from developing their own initiatives in international education. Only recently has their exclusive character, isolated from the rest of higher education, come into question.

As a result of the European mobility programmes and the emergence of the ‘competitiveness’ rationale, institutions of higher education started to develop courses and programmes in English. Soon, they were outnumbering courses offered by the institutes of international education, although these maintained their strong position in relation to the developing countries, thanks to their long tradition and the financial support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The development of English-taught courses and programmes in regular Dutch higher education was considered more threatening than the isolated institutes of international education. In a public debate in the Netherlands in 1989 which arose from a plea in a television interview (December 12, 1989) by the then Minister of Education, J. Ritzen, for more instruction in English at Dutch universities, the arguments used are mainly of the three kinds mentioned above: the potential threat to and perhaps disappearance of the local language; the related danger of the disappearance of local cultural practices and products; and the fear for cultural and linguistic hegemony and imperialism. The media and in particular politicians started a furious campaign to denounce the plea as fundamentally undesirable. Although the minister explicitly stated that not all degree programmes but only more courses should be given in the English language, in the context of growing internationalisation of higher education, the media and politicians interpreted the plea as if all programmes and courses in Dutch higher education should be taught in English.

On May 23, 1990, in Ghent, Belgium, the minister spoke again of the role of English as a common language for communication in science and to stimulate exchange of students. When the Universiteit van Amsterdam later that year announced that it predicted 25% of its courses would be taught in English in the near future, a second wave of opposition in the media and parliament started. This time the media outcry was not limited to the Netherlands. Using a news item of the Guardian News Service, which suggested that the Dutch education ministry had announced that Dutch would cease to be the official teaching language in schools and universities across the Netherlands, other media in the UK, Italy, USA and as far away as New Zealand gave their readers the impression that English would be the new exclusive language of instruction in Dutch education.
Parliament forced the minister to stop this supposed trend. The minister appointed a committee to explore if there was ground for anchoring teaching in Dutch in the law. The committee did not see the need for such a decision because of the deep social roots of Dutch and the fear that higher education would not be able nor willing to apply the law. This was later confirmed in a report in 1994 by the Inspectie van het Onderwijs (Inspection of Education, 1994), which states that the important position of English in Dutch higher education is forced by external, international developments. The Inspection was more concerned about the state of foreign language education for Dutch students.

The minister agreed with the committee, but parliament forced him to change his mind. The Higher Education and Research Bill of 1993 decrees that all instruction and examinations are to take place in the Dutch language (Section 7.1). Permission to use another language is limited to the following situations (Section 7.2):

- The instruction and examinations pertain to a foreign language
- The courses are conducted by a visiting lecturer whose mother tongue is a foreign language
- wherever necessary in view of the specific nature of the course or the students’ origin, in accordance with a code of practice drawn up by the institution concerned. (Ministerie van Onderwijs en Wetenschappen, 1997; see also Vink, 1995, 2).

It is interesting to observe that, after the public and political storm over instruction in English in Dutch higher education in the early 1990s, this debate – with the exception of a very small minority of language and culture puritans – has almost completely evaporated. This was not the result of institutions of higher education abandoning teaching in English, as a consequence of the legal limitations. On the contrary, according to information by NUFFIC (2000 a), at present some 500 courses are taught entirely in English, approximately 200 of which lead to an international master’s degree. In Europe, only the UK offers a larger number of master’s degree courses taught in English.

There appears to be a general acceptance now, although to a lesser extent in the political arena, that instruction in English is a necessary evil in order to be a player in the global educational market – as was already generally accepted for the scientific role of universities. In the 1997 policy paper on the internationalisation of education of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (1997, 17-19), ‘Talents Unlimited’, much attention is paid to the legal limitations of teaching a language other than Dutch. One sentence, however, indicates a change: “A more general view is that universities and colleges themselves have an interest in offering foreign language teaching as part of their courses.” A subtle statement indicating that, although the law says differently, accepted practice is that teaching in English is allowed. Higher education therefore follows several other examples of ‘tolerance’ in Dutch politics, such as the attitudes towards soft drugs and euthanasia. The rationale might be that Dutch politics have accepted, as Dronkers (1993, 295) put it, that not the supply of internationally oriented education, but rather the demand determines the degree of internationalisation. The difference, however, is that, where Dronkers in 1993 saw the demand coming from pupils, students and parents in the Netherlands itself – something that is certainly true for the success of bilingual primary and secondary schools

---

94 A member of parliament for a small Christian-democratic opposition party criticized in the magazine Academia (no. 13, 2000) of the Dutch Association of Universities, VSNU, this attitude of tolerance to the use of English in Dutch higher education, but even he had to acknowledge that it is a fact that one cannot escape from.
Internationalisation of Higher Education

in the Netherlands – for higher education that demand is driven more by the international market. In a trading nation, principles take second place to the opportunities for trade. Dronkers’ conclusion (1993, 304) that the pressure in the Netherlands for international education stems primarily from the demand from internationally oriented Dutch parents, and is thus class-related to the development of a cosmopolitan culture among a section of the Dutch elite, is based on a study among pupils in secondary education. Although the development of the international dimension at this level will have an impact on the internationalisation of tertiary education, in particular on the mobility of its students, this does not provide an adequate explanation for the growth of international education programmes in Dutch higher education. This growth has been – in particular in recent years – primarily based on the import of international students.

One concern is the limited participation of Dutch students in these programmes. The study by Van der Wende (1996) on the internationalisation of the curriculum in Dutch higher education confirms this. The OECD has developed a typology with nine types of internationalised curricula (Ibid., 45):

1. curricula with an international subject;
2. curricula in which the traditional/original subject area is broadened by an internationally comparative approach;
3. curricula which prepare students for international professions;
4. curricula in foreign languages or linguistics which explicitly address cross-communication issues and provide training in intercultural skills;
5. interdisciplinary programmes such as regional and area studies, covering more than one country;
6. curricula leading to internationally recognised professional qualifications;
7. curricula leading to joint or double degrees;
8. curricula of which compulsory parts are offered at institution(s) abroad, staffed by local lecturers;
9. curricula in which the content is especially designed for foreign students.

As Van der Wende (Ibid., 193) observes, some of these types (one, two, four, and five) refer directly to the content of the curriculum; types three and nine to its orientation; and types six, seven and eight to specific operational aspects. For that reason she suggest changing the typology to a more systematic analysis of curricula on content, orientation and operation.

If we look at the programmes offered by Dutch institutions of higher education in the English language, the emphasis lies on orientation and operation, not primarily on the international content. The 2000–2001 Catalogue of International Courses in The Netherlands, published by NUFFIC (2000 b), presents almost 500 study and training programmes taught in the English language, ranging from short training seminars to fully fledged bachelor’s and master’s degree programmes. Some of these courses, around 150, are offered by the Institutes for International Education, introduced in the 1950s to offer specialised training for students from developing countries. The other 350 programmes are offered by the 14 universities and 55 ‘hogescholen’ (which call themselves ‘universities of professional education’ in English).

The rapid expansion in the 1990s of international English–taught courses by Dutch universities and hogescholen, has created a rather complex myriad of programmes, levels,
degrees, entrance requirements and accreditation procedures, which does not help the marketing of Dutch higher education abroad. Universities offer certificate programmes at the undergraduate and graduate level; bachelor degree programmes (American style at the University College Utrecht); master’s degree programmes integrated into the regular degree programme; master’s degree programmes with a bachelor’s degree as an entrance requirement and outside the regular degree structure; advanced master’s degree programmes that require a master’s or doctorandus degree for admission; and diploma programmes that require a master’s degree. Hogescholen offer bachelor’s degree programmes integrated into the regular degree structure; as well as master’s degree programmes outside the national degree structure, either by accreditation via a foreign institution (mostly British) or accredited by their own Dutch Accreditation Agency. The Institutes for International Education offer master’s degrees and diploma programmes.

Pressure both from inside the institutions of higher education themselves and from the Bologna Declaration, has stimulated the Minister of Education, Science and Culture to move in a direction which will give more structure to this myriad of degrees and programmes. The introduction of the bachelor’s and master’s degree into Dutch higher education; the development of a national accreditation agency for the degree programmes; and the integration of the Institutes of International Education into universities, are initiatives directed towards giving more coherence to Dutch higher education.

As far as the use of the English language is concerned, one can expect that at the graduate level (both PhD and master’s degree programmes) English will become the dominant language of instruction, while at the undergraduate level Dutch will continue to predominate. There will be exceptions to this rule at both levels but the general trend will be in this direction, following the pattern of the international courses already provided by Dutch higher education and implicitly accepted both by the higher education community itself and by the government.

In the latest document of the Minister van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen (Minister of Education, Culture and Science) on internationalisation of education in the Netherlands (1999), ‘Kennis: Geven en Nemen’ (Knowledge: Give and Take), no reference is made to the growing number of courses taught in English, but this development is welcomed implicitly, given the emphasis in the document on raising the profile of Dutch higher education abroad and on investment in recruiting international students to the Netherlands. Significantly, no questions were raised about the growing number of courses taught in English and the related recruitment efforts abroad in either the media or parliament.

Similar trends can be observed in other small language countries, such as Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland, as well as some Central and Eastern European countries. In Germany and Austria, teaching in the English language is no longer considered as something that is ‘not done’. The situation is still different in Southern Europe, but even there the trend is to open higher education to instruction in languages other than the local language. The reason for this lies in the internationalisation and globalisation of higher education and the related notion of education as an export commodity, which was already present in Anglo-Saxon higher education but reached the European continent in the second half of the 1990s. At the opposite end of the spectrum, a similar situation can be observed in some countries in Asia, where the language of instruction is English but additional teaching in the native language is now on the national agenda.
The tension between the need for teaching in the native language (as part of a national identity moving, away from the colonial past) and the importance of English in the world of science (which implies a growing demand for teaching and research in English) is clearly felt in, for instance, Hong Kong, Indonesia and Singapore. (De Wit, 1997 b, 27, see also Kornpetpanee, 1999, 102)

3. Educational aspects of teaching in a foreign language

Although the political opposition to teaching in English seems to be fading, two relevant issues are still raised, usually by the academic community itself: the academic performance of international students in relation to their English-language proficiency, and the performance of the instructor when teaching in a language other than his/her mother tongue. Instead of the political arguments described above, the concern is that teaching in a foreign language could affect the quality of education. Most of the research on these two issues has been done in the United States, which is understandable given the high number of international students and the widespread use of international teaching assistants and academic staff. In the continental European context, English is a foreign instructional language for both the teacher and the students, and little research has been done under these specific circumstances, which are becoming more common. One of the few studies is the dissertation by Diana Vink (1995) on English as the medium of instruction in Dutch engineering education. As far as the experiences of Dutch lecturers with teaching in English are concerned, Vink (Ibid., 140) concludes that switching from the mother tongue to English has certain negative effects: linguistic limitations, a reduced ability to improvise, an increased workload, a less favourable view of their instructional quality, and an increased emphasis on their teaching skills. These negative effects tend to be fewer when the lecturer is more experienced, has a good command of English, and has had ample opportunity to practice and use these skills (Ibid., 142). In teaching behaviour, she observes a moderate, negative effect: "a change of instructional language tends to reduce the redundancy of lecturers' subject matter presentations, lecturers' speech rate, their expressiveness, and their clarity and accuracy of expression" (Ibid., 145). For students, she concludes that a switch from the mother tongue to English as the medium of instruction moderately reduces Dutch’ students learning (Ibid., 149) and has a weak and inconsistent effect on Dutch students' perceptions of the instruction offered (Ibid., 151). English-medium instruction, according to Vink (Ibid., 152), may require a slower rate of delivery compared to instruction in the mother tongue.

As measures to reduce these negative effects, she proposes screening lecturers on their English-language proficiency, prior to their teaching assignment. Those who do not pass the screening should be given the opportunity to improve their proficiency. The practice and use of English could be stimulated by encouraging academic experiences abroad (teaching, research, conferences, academic reading and writing). Other measures would be: use only experienced teachers; make teaching experience and qualifications part of the selection process for new academic staff; and give staff temporary exemption from other duties when they conduct a course in English for the first time. For students she recommends screening on English proficiency and measures to improve their language skills also. As curriculum-related measures, she suggests reducing the content coverage or extending the number of contact hours and/or changing from a teacher-oriented to a student-oriented format of instruction. (Ibid., 155-162)
Internationalisation of Higher Education

Vink's study is focused on engineering education and on the effect on Dutch lecturers and students, but her study has wider implications, for instance for non-English-mother-tongue lecturers teaching non-English-mother-tongue international students from other countries. This is important given the development of the international student market worldwide. Even in the United States this situation is becoming relevant as more and more academic staff and students without English as their mother tongue meet each other in the classroom.

Although more implicitly and gradually than explicitly and actively, most Dutch higher education institutions are implementing the recommendations made by Vink, so as to avoid losing their potential share in the international student market.

4. Concluding remarks

The trend is clear that English is becoming the global language of communication in science and teaching. The emphasis on English as the language of instruction is a mixed blessing, however. Nana Rinehart correctly points to the 'hazards of arrogance' that "the increasing use of English deprives monolingual Americans (and other Anglo-Saxons) of motivation for breaking out of their isolation and reinforcing their conscious or unconscious linguistic arrogance." She argues that instead of fighting the dominant role of English, emphasis should move on to the acceptance of the intrinsic value of language acquisition as such and the link between language and culture. 95 Abram de Swaan in an interview with NRC Handelsblad (22 mei 1999) speaks of "de enorme, 'volstrekt onverdiende' bevoordeling van Engelse moedertaal sprekers" (the immense, 'absolutely undeserved' favouring of native English speakers), and makes an appeal for the 'de-englishisation' of English to fight that privilege. Raman Singh states that we should not make Standard English synonymous with Standard Values, or, to be more precise, allow Standard English to become a transmitter of English or more broadly Anglo-Saxon values. 96

This chapter has dealt with the growing importance of English as the language of communication, distribution of knowledge and instruction in higher education. The picture would not be complete without making reference to the important role of language learning as part of the internationalisation of higher education. The role of English as the global language of communication is strongly linked to the existence of a multilingual society. While globalisation is linked to the use of English as its 'lingua franca', internationalisation of higher education is linked to the strengthening of multilingualism. Study abroad is an important instrument in developing the learning of languages, even in those institutions where English has emerged as the second language of instruction. A combination of courses taught in English with courses on local language, culture and history appears to be one effective way of providing a multilingualistic and multicultural dimension in the education of those who might otherwise be very hesitant about a study abroad experience in a country and institution that only teaches in the local language. Programmes to stimulate foreign language training as part of the home curriculum and via study abroad are becoming more and more important in maintaining a multilingual society in which English is not the only communication link. Universities that develop programmes taught in English have an extra

95 Presentation at Session 'Imperial discourse or lingua franca? The question of language in international exchange', 11th Annual Conference of the EAIE, Maastricht, 2-4 December 1999.

96 See note 91.

174
Internationalisation of Higher Education

obligation to invest in strengthening study of the mother tongue and of other foreign languages as well. This applies to universities in the Anglo-Saxon world as well as to universities in other regions.

97 This is not the place to deal in detail with language learning in a study abroad context. Reference is made to a special issue of the journal ‘Frontiers’ (1998) on this theme, in particular the articles by Freed: ‘An Overview of Issues and Research in Language Learning in a Study Abroad Setting’, and Coleman: ‘Language Learning and Study Abroad: The European Perspective.’ See also the articles of Lambert on Languages and International Studies in Moore and Morfit (1993).