



Traduction vers l'anglais par Isabelle Barth

Higher education in vehicular English: quality in question

By Claude Truchot, 21 November 2010

Translated by Dr Isabelle Barth (<http://lecritoire.jimdo.com>)

An English specialist and sociolinguist, the writer develops here a point of view which could be considered as "politically incorrect", however well-argued about the use of vehicular English in the European higher education systems. Claude Truchot hopes then to contribute in opening a debate. Another way to look at languages is possible.

Globalization, Universities and Languages.

The Global Market of Knowledge.

If the development of sciences and techniques allowed the development of the "Society of Knowledge", the main idea in the world of globalization classified knowledge as an economical asset and made it an issue in the market. What the theorists of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) call the "Economy of Knowledge" can be characterized by the marketing of the results of research and education at a world level. This marketing is more and more taken over by private companies mainly in North America and less developed countries (Latin America and Africa). In Europe, until now this privatization has been restricted. Traditional higher education establishments have to restructure to become production and marketing companies of knowledge, to become competitive and to conform to recognizable norms which can be readily used for the world capitalist production. The classifications of higher education establishments at a world level spur this competition and exacerbate it. This development creates huge disparities between the establishments, or widens those that already exist. At the top are the universities which you can say are "globalized", those which are taken on in the world market of knowledge. They are a kind of "Premier League" in which are listed the 100 first universities classified by the university Jiao Tong of Shanghai, 2/3 of which are in English-speaking countries and share the "flagship products" that are the Nobel prizes. They



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are aimed at training the entrepreneurial elites and other managers of our societies.

Internationalize at any cost

Being recognized at the international level has become the main concern of the establishments. This internationalization is being set up in various ways. Universities and schools are mainly trying to attract foreign students; the percentage of these foreign students in their students' numbers appears as a criterion for their level of internationalization. This university "clientele" comes mainly from the new middle-class of the emerging countries (China, India, Brazil). In order to do so, they adapt their courses or create "international" courses for that purpose. The European integration of higher education, known as the Bologna Process, organized this internationalization in standardizing degrees in three levels: bachelor or licence, master and doctorate, in the same manner as the American system, and thus established a single system of credits recognized by the establishments whatever the country. Participation to international exchanges programs aimed at promoting the students' mobility, such as the European Erasmus program, is the usual supplement for this target. Establishments aiming at a high level of internationalization in particular also use other means. These latter undertake to take part in courses common to several universities from different countries. The European Erasmus Mundus program was conceived to favour these initiatives, and its support is also a criterion for internationalization. Some universities founded subsidiaries abroad, even subsidiaries generally within the framework of "joint venture", joint processes with the universities of the country. This strategy is more and more favoured by American and British universities, but also by high-level French and German establishments. These processes raise of course many questions about languages. The vast majority answer from the universities and other establishments is the use of vehicular English as a teaching language. In this paper, we will try to make an inventory of this practice in Europe and measure the effects and implications.



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Vehicular English: what is it exactly?

Vehicular English would be characterized by its being learned as a foreign language; it would be used by people for whom it is not the mother tongue, nor the main language; another characteristic would be the extreme variety of its forms of expressions, mainly because of the differences in the level of its acquisition. We suggest the phrase "lingua franca" as a substitute used in English and which seems to be used in other languages. Institutions such as the *British Council* try to promote the enhancing phrase "lingua academia". We will see that this enhanced value has very little justification.

Emergence and spread of a practice

In Europe

The practice of using English as a vehicular language in higher education was first established in the Northern European countries from the 1990's and has never stopped expanding. In the Netherlands, the teaching in English is part of the second university teaching, then becomes more important, even prevailing, for the highest degrees [1]. In a study carried out in 2008-2009 for the newspaper NRC Handelsblad, Marlies Hagers [2] underlines that out of the 170 Masters awarded in the Amsterdam universities, 105 were in English, 89 out of the 196 at the university of Utrecht. In Maastricht, the 46 Masters are all in English, the only exception being the Master in Dutch law. A study carried out by U. Ammon et G. McConnell (2002) [3] in 21 countries showed that, following Northern Europe, this practice spread very quickly in Germany, Central Europe, France and Southern Europe. In Germany, the first university degree in English was created in 1997. According the authors of the study, in 2001, all the German universities had introduced an "English-speaking" degree in their education offer. Odile Schneider-Mizony (2006) [4] underlines that the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD), the German Exchange University Department, lists 140 universities, engineer colleges (Fachhochschulent) and Higher Education School that each offer between 1 and 25 programs of studies partially or totally in English. Organizations which follow with interest and encourage the process of Anglicization are trying to



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assess its scope at the European level. In 2005, the British Council listed 1500 Masters courses in English in Europe. A survey posed by the Stifterverband (Wachter/Maiworm, 2007) [5] and carried out in 2007 in 27 European countries listed 2400 programs in English, 79 % of which are Masters and 16 % of which are bachelors. According to this survey, the number has been trebled between 2003 and 2008 [6]. The Bologna process then probably intensified the phenomenon or created an expanding territory, the European sphere of higher education.

The various observations available show that the programs of studies mostly affected are engineering, business and management schools: they represent 27% and 24% respectively of the programs in the 2007 survey. The universities courses which lead on to particularly internationalised fields or in which the American influence dominates, are aiming nowadays at using vehicular English. In a survey on a representative sample of universities from 6 continental European countries (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Switzerland), Marc Chesney (2009) [7] shows that in the field of economy, finance and management, many programs are now fully in English. Of a total of 153 Masters listed, 44 use English and 31 are bilingual (English and national language), generally in a transitional manner. We can count only 11 Masters using German only and 10 French only, when according the selected samples, these two languages should have higher percentages.

In France, too.

CampusFrance, the official agency, formerly EduFrance, in charge of promoting the French higher education abroad, lists the courses given in English by higher education establishments in France. The list of the agency established in 2007 counted 496 of them [8]. These "English-speaking" courses are mainly Masters (about 80 %). They are shared between 159 establishments. These schools account for about half the offer of courses. According the chairman of the conference of high schools, quoted in *Le Figaro* (7 October 2010), 80% of the programs of studies leading to a degree in the business schools, and 30 % of the engineers' schools would be in



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English nowadays. This practice is spreading to the universities wanting to be given an international label. Thus the University of Strasbourg displays the English version of its website [9]. 10 Masters are entirely or partly in English at the start of the school year 2010-2011, in various fields: sciences, law, philosophy, political sciences, and international relations. Four are entirely in English, the others use English and French in varying amounts (from 90% in English to 90% in French). To which you can add the "*Master in International and European Business*" from the School of Management integrated into the University of Strasbourg where teaching is in English, nonetheless with some teaching of the French language.

Advanced Motivations and what they cover

This manner of treating the questions of languages is done without previous studies, without debates, without assessment by the establishments or the competent public authorities, without other solutions being looked for. In the same manner as the fifth postulate was the key of the Euclidian geometry, the use of English is the inviolable entry passport to the university managers to any kind of internationalisation. Supporting this choice of vehicular English is accompanied with more or less explicit motivations for which a critical approach is necessary.

The "linguistic obstacles" to internationalisation

The argument mostly given is that the national language, which is usually used in education, is not widespread enough outside the borders of the country and would be an obstacle to any internationalisation. It would in particular be an obstacle to the coming of foreign students and the participation in exchange programs.

It is true that in the competition context, the countries having languages with a big circulation are a priori better placed than those having less circulated languages. All the more that some of them, such as the United-Kingdom or France, benefit from an antecedence as far as hosting foreign students is concerned. The argument was anyway a deciding factor when the Erasmus



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program was set up. The Northern European universities feared that in participating in this program, they would only be supplying students in favour of the British, French and Spanish universities without welcoming any themselves. The teaching in vehicular English was then seen as a miraculous solution. The Nordic example was followed almost everywhere else. We can consider that in Europe, Erasmus played a major role in the implementation of this practice in the university world (Truchot, 2008, [10]).

The argument of the linguistic obstacle has to nonetheless be observed in a critical manner. If you take the case of Norway, where the courses in English have been developed, half of the foreign students preferred to integrate in programs of studies where the teaching language was Norwegian [11]. It is however a language which is only spoken by around 4.7 millions speakers and which has two standard forms (bokmål and nynorsk). So why what is possible for some would not be possible for others? **The integration in the language of the host country could have been helped with appropriate politics.** We could have thought that the European Commission, when they set up the Erasmus program, would have added sizeable assistance for the linguistic training of the students, mainly devoted to the learning of languages known as the "Lwult" (Less widely used and less taught) languages in the European jargon. In fact, these forms of help are marginalised. According the data published by the European Commission, from 2000 to 2003, 3,632 students benefited from a linguistic training borne by the European credit [12]. However during this period around 400,000 students took part to Erasmus exchanges. This prompts the thinking, as we are going to see, that the choice of English was deliberate and that the search for other solutions was not on the agenda.

Mobility... at home

The principle on which the mobility in higher education has an eminently formative value is a founding tradition of the university. Mobility allows students to be faced with differences, cultures, histories, thought movements, civilisations. The problem is that the programs of studies in English are not envisioned as being different. Not only do they use the same language, but



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they also teach the same knowledge based on the same references, themselves developed with the same language, the one which dominates the dissemination of research. They are based on the same models as those set up in American and English-speaking universities which exert a real fascination on the political and university managers in Europe. In fact they give the possibility to local students to train at home in these homogenizing models. In Norway, 85% of the students registered in the English-speaking programs of studies are in fact Norwegians.

Thankfully, there are academics to raise the point that this reducing homogenization will have negative consequences such as the disappearance of movements of thought, of reference authors who contributed to building up subjects written in other languages. It is not sure that a History teacher using vehicular English would be inspired by the works of the *Écoles des Annales* by Marc Bloch and Lucien Fèvre who marked the historical sciences as much of their approach of economical history is so little on the same wavelength as the ideology which is presently dominating.

"Brain gain vs. brain drain"?

The argument expressed by this play on words is that the teaching in English would contribute to having brilliant students in one country and avoiding the brain drain. It is often only a delusion. In a detailed testimony on the use of English at the Faculty of high business studies at the University of Lausanne, Jean-Claude Usunier (2009) [13] demonstrates this. Foreign students are the main targets of recruitment and the main supporting point is the teaching in "lingua franca" put in force by the management. But, many of the foreign students come from countries where the level of studies is low, especially the teaching of foreign languages. For most of them, their knowledge of English is a handicap, the insufficient appropriation of knowledge is a source of failure. Some written productions are sometimes unreadable and require several examiners. These foreign students are of a lower level than the local students who are making progress with more difficulties than they would do in French, the language in which they have been socialised and educated.



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These programs of studies do not avoid either the brain drain. Given the domineering position of the universities of English-speaking countries in the merchandising of the "educational services", the latter are draining first and foremost the best students, or those who have the best knowledge of English. Anyway the propensity of continental universities to imitate the English-speaking universities manages to convince the students who have the intellectual, but mainly the economical, means that it is better to look for the real thing than make do with an imitation.

English = Internationalisation?

In fact the main motives for the instigators of teaching in vehicular English is mainly ideological: they are convinced that internationalisation can only happen in English. In Northern Europe, the use of English quickly appears as being not a means to make up for a handicap, but a pressing necessity, the adherence to the model of what should be the internationalisation of higher education. It is the adherence to such a model which explains greatly the spreading of teaching in common English in countries having widely circulated languages: Germany, France, Spain. All the more in other countries. In Sweden, the 2005 law "New World - New University" states in plain language: "Obstacles to internationalisation have to be eliminated, in Sweden and at the international level." [14]. This measure gives full power to the university authorities to set aside the Swedish language if they think it can be a hindrance.

The belief that internationalisation can only be done through English can be integrated into all the clichés characterizing the neo-liberal discourse on higher education. O. Schneider-Mizony (2006) drives them out in a study of the discourse held in Germany to justify the creation of English-speaking programs of studies (Englischsprachige Studiengänge or ES): taking part in excellence, integrating the scientific leadership, being part of the global actors. Everything is linked to the belief in the modernity of English, in the allegiance to cultural Anglo-Saxon models. These discourses do not stand up to the acknowledgement of the reality. When you ask the foreign students why



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they chose those ES courses, they answer that they were not accepted in an American university. As far as the German employment market is concerned, it has not yet given a special preference to these courses.

Teaching in vehicular English: quality in question

We will add here another acknowledgement which is that the "English-speaking" programs of studies that are issuing supposedly high-level degrees are usually cheap-rate courses. They rest on a kind of postulate according to which it is possible to do with a "lingua franca" what could be done in a language in which you have been socialised and educated, and that this assumed ability applies to the transmission and acquisition of knowledge. This representation of what we know of a language is demolished as soon as we agree to examine the reality of the practices, the quality of the transmission of the knowledge by the teachers, the abilities of the students to acquire the knowledge and to express themselves, mainly in a written manner, and the problems raised by the assessment of knowledge in those circumstances.

The English of the teachers

The linguistic level of teachers is very unequal. The establishments are trying to recruit native speakers. But academics with a high level of English do not make their career in continental English-speaking universities. These latter recruit at a lower level, even if it means preferring the linguistic abilities to the scientific qualifications of the local candidate. If there are no native speakers, they then choose among the teachers who are thought to have a sufficient knowledge of English even if it means here too giving some preference to the linguistic abilities. But they are very few those who have the necessary skills in a foreign language which would allow them to master the scientific, didactic and inter-personnel communication needed to a full exercise of their job. It is what is coming out from the observations done in the Northern European universities, all the more revealing that in those countries the general level of English is supposedly higher than in the rest of Europe, especially in France. Of course, many teachers when teaching use an English that the observers



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qualify as "correct". It is what Beysa Bjorkman (2008) [15] notices in a study on the English used in one Swedish technical university. She underlines nonetheless that the English of the teachers is not free from approximations and mistakes. In her study of the Dutch academics teaching in English, Marlies Hagers (2009) makes the same observations on the accuracy of the language, however all the teachers she interviewed state their frustrations and limitations in this **conventional and constrained exercise which is not to speak but to read out loud written papers**. No teacher worthy of the name would teach in this manner in his/her mother or usual tongue. If (s)he masters well the content of his/her class, (s)he would adapt it according the audience, try to attract the attention, improvise when necessary, punctuate with anecdotes to revive the attention. Moreover, even in the regions where the level of English is supposed to be high, the cases of an approximate mastery of it are not rare. Hagers notices that at the University of Tilburg where the quality of the English is part of the assessment of the teaching, students' comments on the English used by their teachers are often critical, even sarcastic. Resorting to a vehicular language is thus taken in a negative manner not only for the pedagogy but also in the relationships between lecturers and students.

In the countries where the knowledge and practice of English is less developed, the asset resources of the teachers in the "English-speaking" courses is often made up of around one hundred teaching hours and of practices allowing the use of an approximate idiom which it would be exaggerated to call "English language" and which should better be qualified as "globish". During recruitment, Universities rely more on the publications in English of the candidates. But in almost all the cases the texts were revised and rewritten for publications and are not the reflection of the level in English of the people signing them. However these courses mainly given in "globish" are given an international label, which only the English language seems to guarantee in the mind of the promoters of degrees and licensed examiners in higher education.



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The English of the acquisition of knowledge

For the acceptance of students, the establishments are setting out demands for a level in the teaching language, usually assessed with a test. In several establishments listed by CampusFrance, the demand is 750 points for the TOEIC and 500 for the TOEFL [16]. Which is more or less equivalent to B1, the threshold level for the Common European Framework for Language created by the European Council [17]. But it can be lower. And it is not known whether these norms are respected. The only study on the language demands which is available is from the European College in Bruges which issues degrees specialised in European Studies and trains a good number of the civil servants for the European institutions. The common languages are English and French; the level B2 is required in one language and A2 in the other. At the end of the study cycle, 80% of the whose mother tongue is not English, state having a C1 or higher level, and 55% state having it in French. (Malacek, 2010) [18]. Yet, their real levels are not checked and the study only presents these statements. Knowing what real knowledge they have of the languages would, however, be very useful for comparison between this prestigious institution which is recruiting at a high level (Master) and has important means at the disposal of the students and the other establishments which are now instituting the use of vehicular languages.

We are starting to have observations at our disposal concerning the level and practices of the students accepted in English-speaking programs of studies. Beysa Björkman (2008), in her study on one technical university in Sweden, described that the English spoken during exchanges between the teachers and the students and in between students. It came out that they do not use standard English; it is simplified and approximate even if it stays functional, in other words, it is "globish", of which she gives many examples. She underlines very aptly that if she could pick out the communication strategies used by the students to try and make themselves understood, she could not observe what they were not able to say. We are still speculating on the manner in which the passage from oral to written is done and on their abilities to express themselves in a written manner in English when they are in a



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company, knowing how important written communication in businesses, as was shown by the studies on the part played by languages at work (Boutet, 2009) [19]. It is right that at work, the vehicular use of English has shown its limits when faced with the demands of communication, mainly when the stakes are not just ideological or social (Truchot, 2009) [20].

In his preamble to the law "New world – New University" in 2005, the Swedish Minister for Education declared: "The aim of the government is for Sweden to be a pilot nation of knowledge [21]". If he was hoping to reach this with programs of studies using a common English, his hopes are likely to be disappointed.

What can be said of such courses in other parts of Europe? The acknowledgement of gap between the level in English in these countries and the Northern European countries force them to try and reduce them. Some are making it a political priority. In Italy, let's remind ourselves of the slogan used by S. Berlusconi in his electoral campaign in 2002: "Impresa! Internet! Inglese!" In France, in the anthology of declarations of those who are the spokespersons for it, we can include the recommendations of the Attali report (2008) [22]: "Giving ourselves all the means for each pupil to be able to master French, reading, calculation, work in group, English, computer and economy at the end of 6e (*first year of secondary school in France, at the age of 12 – translator's note*)". But nobody is asking which means should be put at the disposal of the public policies to achieve this. What is paradoxical in a context of austerity where the management of the public policies is erected as a society model and where in consequences we are reducing the means at the disposal of education.

In the framework of internationalisation with a humane face, it should be better to value the degrees in the language of the country, organise proper language training for the foreign students, favoured by their immersion in the natural environment of the language. **A deep and diversified knowledge of foreign languages, gains by training, well set-up mobility, and even the sensible use of foreign vehicular languages, would guarantee the international openness of the degree. Another way of treating languages**



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is possible. Unfortunately, in the present day, the way higher education is internationalized, it is not the alternative treatment which is prevailing. In the end, it is to the detriment of university teaching.

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[1] Source: association for the Dutch language: www.taalunie.org

[2] HAGERS Marlies (2009) « The Globalization of College, English takes over at Dutch Universities », NRC Handelsblad, 20 mars 2009, www.nrc.nl

[3] AMMON Ulrich / McCONNELL Grant (2002) English as an Academic Language in Europe, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang.

[4] SCHNEIDER-MIZONY Odile (2006) « L'anglicisation de l'enseignement supérieur en Allemagne et ses discours de justification », Nancy: Les nouveaux cahiers d'allemand, pp. 331-347.

[5] WÄCHTER B./ MAIWORM F., 2008, English-taught Programs in European Higher Education, Bonn : Lemmens. Stifterverband is a German foundation supported by companies and employers to intervene in the scientific and university worlds, www.stifterverband.de

[6] Odile Schneider-Mizony (2006) invites to consider the data of this survey with caution as "they rely solely on the declarations of interviewed people, who moreover are the project managers of these programs of studies with financial as well as symbolical stakes".

[7] CHESNEY Marc (2009) « Enjeux et conséquences de l'utilisation de l'anglais pour les études d'économie et de gestion à l'université » Conference on "French in higher education and research, University of Geneva, 18 March 2009.

[8] CampusFrance : www.campusfrance.org

[9] Université de Strasbourg unistra.fr/en – Higher education in Vehicular English: Quality in question; 11/01/2011 10:19

http://www.diploweb.com/spip.php?page=imprimer&id_article=686 Page 13 of 14

[10] TRUCHOT Claude (2008) Europe : l'enjeu linguistique, Paris : La Documentation française, Collection Les études, 160 pages.

[11] According a study undertaken in 2009 by the Official Institute of Studies Nifu-Step (<http://www.nifustep.no>) on the request on the Council for Languages (Språkrådet).

[12] Source : Portail Europa <http://europa.eu/languages>

[13] USUNIER Jean-Claude (2009) "Un plurilinguisme pragmatique face au mythe de l'anglais lingua franca de l'enseignement supérieur", Colloque Les enjeux du plurilinguisme pour la construction des savoirs, 12-13 novembre 2009, Berne.

[14] New world – New university. A summary of Government Bill 2004/2005 : 162, p.9 « Obstacles to internationalisation must be eliminated, in Sweden and internationally. » (trad.CI.T)

[15] BJÖRKMAN Beysa (2008) "So where we are : Spoken lingua franca English at a Swedish technical university", English today, 24 (2) pp. 11-17.

[16] TOEFL, Test of English as a Foreign Language, fee paying standardized test,



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created by an American private organisation, used by English-speaking university for the acceptance of foreign students, and elsewhere in the world by other universities and companies.

TOEIC, Test of English for International Communication, created by the same organisation (Education testing service) and aimed mainly at companies

[17] According the definition given by the Council of Europe, the European Common Framework for Languages, adopted in 2001, described as completely as possible what the learners of a language should learn in order to use it for communication, and "act with the language". Linguistic knowledge is classified according reference level; there are six of them: from A1 the elementary, A2, B1 _which is the threshold-, B2, C1 and C2, the highest.

[18] MALACEK Klaus, (2010), "Language use of the students of the College of Europe", in Langues et construction européenne, Cahiers du Collège d'Europe, Bruxelles : Peter Lang, pp. 211-236. Collège d'Europe : <http://www.coleurop.be>

[19] BOUTET Josiane, (2005), « Au coeur de la nouvelle économie, l'activité langagière, » Sociolinguistica, Volume 19, pp. 13-21.

[20] TRUCHOT Claude (2009, ed.) Sprachwahl in Europäischen Unternehmen/Language choice in European companies/ Choix linguistiques dans les entreprises en Europe, Sociolinguistica, Vol. 23/2009, Tübingen : De Gruyter Verlag.

[21] « The Government's goal is for Sweden to be a leading knowledge Nation » (p.9).

[22] Report from the Commission for the liberation of French growth, Paris: Quality in question - 11/01/2011 10:19

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