

Following Sweden's Success: Promoting Intercultural Citizenship in the United States

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Abstract

The United States and Mexico, both members of the Organization of American States, enjoy a robust trade relationship galvanized through the North American Free Trade Agreement. However, when it comes to intercultural citizenship, including the ability to speak the national languages of each country, there is a lack of cultural understanding between the two. In contrast, the European Union, through the Council of Europe, supports cultural understanding between its member states, in part, by promoting second language education. The country that has been the most successful in foreign language education is Sweden, where an average of 82% of public school students command English proficiency at the advanced level, as measured by the Common European Framework of Reference, a standardized proficiency scale used internationally. This paper offers an analysis of what has made Sweden so successful in language education and how its approach, supported by membership in the European Union, can be followed in the U.S. to foster intercultural citizenship and to improve second language (e.g., Spanish) proficiency. The methodology for this project consisted of gathering data from European Commission and Council of Europe reports and analyses of U.S. language education data from educational research organizations such as the Center for Applied Linguistics. I have been analyzing this data through the lens of Critical Language Policy. The results show the importance of implementing governmental policy that vigorously promotes language learning and intercultural citizenship. For while the European Union works through the European Commission and the Council of Europe to promote appreciation of linguistic diversity in European countries, little or no similar governmental action can be found within North American countries. Therefore, I offer recommendations for measures to promote intercultural citizenship and the learning of the Spanish language in the United States.

Keywords: Educational policy, second language teaching and learning,

1. Introduction

Historically, the United States and Mexico have had a complex relationship, which involves trade and economic interdependence, shared cultural history, and the effects of immigration on both nations. Yet, despite this complicated relationship, there is a lack of cultural understanding between the two countries. There is a deficiency in the learning of each other's dominant languages along with a lack of intercultural competence on both parts. In contrast, the European Union actively promotes language learning among its member states in order that they effectively communicate with each other. One of the countries that has seen the most success in advanced competence through language learning is Sweden. Unlike those in the U.S., the majority of Swedish students are successful in learning a second language. By the end of their compulsory education, approximately 82% of students have learned English at the advanced level.¹ Clearly there are reasons that many students succeed at such a high level by the end of high school. What has made Sweden so successful in language education? How can the United

States follow its approach to foster intercultural citizenship and to improve second language proficiency? To answer these questions, I focused on the language education policy that governs these countries in order to see if there were any differences in policies and how those affected learning in the schools.

As I narrowed the scope of the research, I looked toward Europe to examine language education policies. Within Europe, I could study the policies promulgated not only by each country, but also by the European Union. However, I found that this was too broad, so I decided to focus on the United Kingdom and Spain. I planned to compare these with Mexico and the United States because of the parallels in language. However, as I was mining the data, I found that this was indeed still too broad. While researching the second language competencies of the citizenry within European countries, I noticed that Sweden was highly successful in second language competence, in this case English. Thus, I decided to focus on Sweden because a study comparing proficiency in English as an additional language showed that they had been the most successful in language learning.² It is important to analyze what has made Sweden so successful in language education and how its approach, supported by membership in the European Union, can be followed in the U.S. to foster intercultural citizenship and to improve second language proficiency. Through the analysis of two documents with similar intent from governmental organizations in Europe and the United States, I will interpret their importance in promoting language learning in Sweden and the United States.

There is a lot that one can learn from the history of an organization or the context in which a policy document was written. Thus, it is important to note the historical background of language education in both countries. A member of the European Union since 1995, Sweden has been guided by the political, economic and educational policies of this international organization. Thus, it is guided by the ideals and values of the European Union. The history of the European Union itself starts in the aftermath of World War II: “The European Union is set up with the aim of ending the frequent and bloody wars between neighbours, which culminated in the Second World War.”³ After so much death and destruction, European countries decided that they could not continue fighting so violently amongst each other. And so, the very foundation of the European Union is built upon the concept that there must be more cultural understanding among countries in Europe. Thus, the European Union promotes language learning within its member states in order to encourage cultural understanding for the prevention of further misunderstandings in the region that could lead to war.

The U.S. story of government promotion of second languages differs from that of the European Union. In the aftermath of World War II, came the Cold War. In 1957, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik I, which was immediately seen as a threat to U.S. superiority. Congress responded by passing the National Defense Education Act to promote increased proficiency in science, engineering, mathematics, and linguistics and language learning. Fast-forward forty-four years to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which revived the realization of the importance of language skills needed in our country. Therefore, 9/11 is seen as “Sputnik” moment because it was the second wakeup call for the need to improve our foreign language competences in the United States.⁴ The “Sputnik” moment is recalled as a reminder for the pressing need of foreign language capabilities in the country.

2. Literature Review

Previous research has informed the current study, including the role of education for intercultural citizenship, the state of second language education in Europe and the United States, and the importance of national and international policies in providing a mandate for second language learning. This review will highlight such key concepts.

Michael Byram’s conceptualization of Intercultural Citizenship goes right to the importance of language learning. According to Byram, being intercultural means more than just recognizing or knowing about a different culture. Byram states, “To act interculturally, however, requires a willingness to suspend those deeper values, at least temporarily, in order to be able to understand and empathise with the values of others that are incompatible with one’s own.”⁵ It is not enough to just learn about someone else’s culture, being intercultural takes on a deeper meaning and understanding. Becoming an intercultural citizen, therefore, adds a new dimension that combines language learning with political education. Education in intercultural citizenship prepares students for such experiences in which their deep rooted values and beliefs might clash with others’ values or beliefs. Rather than resisting, intercultural citizenship would encourage students to meet those challenges.⁶ Byram’s research on intercultural citizenship within EU member states is valuable to the current study because it demonstrates the importance of not just language learning, but of having a deep comprehension and appreciation for other cultures. This enables a person to become a better global citizen with a much deeper understanding of the world.

However, if becoming an intercultural citizen relies on achieving proficiency in a second language, what progress do we see in the United States? Pufahl and Rhodes, of the Center for Applied Linguistics in the United States, offer

a recent analysis of the overall status of foreign language education in the U.S. Their research study shows that there are fewer elementary schools offering foreign language education in the United States than there used to be. In 1997, 31% of elementary schools offered foreign language education whereas in 2008, only 25% offered them.⁷ One of the reasons that so few schools have offered foreign language education and have not planned to offer such courses in the future has been the lack of funding. Also, some schools included in the study indicated that there were not enough foreign language teachers available and that languages were simply not seen as part of the elementary school curriculum.⁸ The work of Pufahl and Rhodes helps us understand the status and the value placed on language learning in the United States, especially at the primary level. In secondary education, there was also a decrease in foreign language instruction mostly because there was a significant decrease of middle schools offering language instruction. From 75% of schools in 1997, only 58% of middle schools continued to offer foreign language instruction in 2008. The high schools offering language learning programs however, stayed largely the same over the same time frame.⁹ Overall, Pufahl and Rhode's study helps us understand the course of foreign language education in the United States over the period of time studied. Other reports published by the Center for Applied Second Language Studies at the University of Oregon give us information on the foreign language proficiency levels that high schools students reach in the United States.¹⁰ This previous research study informs the current one with information regarding foreign language instruction in the United States.

Another important question to consider is how governmental policies or visions are interpreted at the local level. The research and writing of Woodside-Giron¹¹ in critical discourse analysis and Johnson¹², in the ethnography of language policy, informs the current study in its methodology. Critical Language Policy seeks to link language policy with the actual educational practices and interpretation at the local level. Johnson argues that policy implementation is determined by the interpretation at the local level and not the actual text of the language policy.¹³ Critiques of Critical Language Policy by both Woodside-Giron and Johnson will be further discussed in the Methodology section.

3. Methodology

In order to analyze how second language learning is promoted in Sweden and in the United States, I researched language education policies promoted in each country. During the search I came across a multitude of documents from the European Union, of which Sweden is a member, and the Council of Europe, which seek to promote language learning among its member states. One in particular that caught my interest was *Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004-2006*. This document was developed by the European Commission, the executive body of the European Union. The main purpose of this document was to lay out the main policy objectives of the European Union and to identify three areas of action. It also made concrete proposals for short term improvements.¹⁴ Although this document had no direct power or authority over the language policy in Sweden, it gave instructions for the general direction that the European Union would like to take in language learning. It is important because the context is identified in the document as well as the importance of teaching and learning languages. I selected this document for further analysis specifically because of its intent to promote language learning among the European Union member states.

Finding a comparable document for the United States was not an easy task. The only comparable agency is the Organization of American States (OAS) or the parties to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). However, neither of these organizations specifically promotes language learning or intercultural competence. They are either economic or political entities that serve different purposes. Thus, the policy document that I chose for the United States, *A Call to Action for National Foreign Language Capabilities*, was developed at the national level and not at the international level.

In 2004, leaders and experts from all three levels of government, education, and the private sector came together for The National Language Conference. Under the leadership of the United States Department of Defense, the participants at this gathering discussed the importance of foreign language competences in the United States. Together they framed a document in which they outlined the important topics discussed during the meeting. *A Call to Action for National Foreign Language Capabilities* is a document that outlined the actions that were recommended to fulfill the need for foreign language abilities in the United States. The historical context was first described in the document as well as a call for the urgent need for national leadership to guide and recommend language learning strategies for the country.¹⁵ This document is comparable to the document from the European Union because they have the similar intent to promote language learning in their respective regions.

Having chosen the two documents to analyze, I further researched language education in both Sweden and the United States. The research data consisted of studies done by the European Commission, which is the executive body of the European Union. For information on language learning in the United States, I found studies done by the Center for Applied Second Language Studies. The data was viewed and analyzed through a Critical Language Policy lens, with insight from the *Ethnography of Language Policy*.¹⁶ This methodology is important for this research study because it not only seeks to analyze policy documents but also how the policy is interpreted and ultimately, implemented at the local level. Critical Language Policy also examines the different levels of discourse and how they can vary in the interpretation of the policy document. Johnson states, “Each context-federal, state, district, school, classroom etc. – carries its own set of dominant and alternative discourses about language education and language policy.”¹⁷ The different levels of discourse can have different interpretations of the language policy. This method, then, was chosen because it looks not just at the actual texts of the documents but also at how they are implemented at the local level.

To further aid the analysis of the two documents, I utilized WordSift, an online word cloud tool for educators. This resource identifies important words in the inserted text and creates a word cloud and a text concordance. This tool was useful in analyzing the vocabulary and word use of both documents.

4. Analysis

The analysis of the documents includes interpreting the general purpose and intent of the documents. The context in which the document was written in is equally important. The structure of the document and the language use was also analyzed for the purpose of this study. The historical context of *Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004-2006* is related to that of the European Union. After World War II, it was necessary to create a peaceful Europe and to take necessary means to prevent such destruction from occurring again.¹⁸ Thus, the European Union was created in order to establish an international organization to promote mutual understanding of member states and it recognizes the cultural and linguistic diversity that exists in Europe. The intent of the document is to promote the learning of foreign languages for the purpose of better communication and mutual understanding among member states. As the document states, “Building a common home in which to live, work and trade together means acquiring the skills to communicate with one another effectively and to understand one another better. Learning and speaking other languages encourages us to become more open to others, their cultures and outlooks.”¹⁹ The European Union has been expanding, and with this, the need for language learning for intercultural competence between its members. Thus, the purpose of this document is to promote language learning for the increasing diversity of the region, work, trade, communication for mutual understanding and to for global market success.

In many ways, *A Call to Action for National Foreign Language Capabilities* is similar to *Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004-2006*. The intent of both documents is comparable because both of them call for the promotion of language learning. However, there is a difference in purpose for which they call for language learning. In contrast to the European Union Action Plan, the United States Language Conference promotes language education for the purpose of national security. The document authors state, “We must act now to improve the gathering and analysis of information, advance international diplomacy, and support military operations. We must act to retain our global market leadership and succeed against increasingly sophisticated competitors whose workforces possess potent combinations of professional skills, knowledge of other cultures, and multiple language proficiencies.”²⁰ Clearly the purposes and reasons for improving foreign language capabilities in the U.S. National Language Conference document are very different than in the European Union Action plan. The main reasons that this documents states for the reasons of promoting foreign language education are for national security, economic competitiveness, and domestic well-being.²¹ On the other hand the European Union document states that there is a need for action for the reasons of work and trade, communication, understanding, and global market success.²² Thus, we can analyze that although both documents promote language learning and seek action to improve foreign language education, they do it for very different purposes and reasons.

The structure of the documents is also meaningful. In the introduction of the European Union Action Plan, the reader is introduced to the context of the importance of language learning in the European Union. Right away we can see that language learning is highly valued because it is needed for intercultural competency, economic and trade purposes, communication, and the global market-place. In fact, so much value is placed in promoting language learning that it is not enough to only learn one language, but the learning of two other languages is encouraged: “Learning one lingua franca alone is not enough. Every European citizen should have meaningful communicative

competence in at least two other languages in addition to his or her mother tongue”.²³ Clearly the standards are quite high but this demonstrates that importance and value that is put on language learning in European culture. In the first section of the action plan, the three broad in which action needs to be taken for language learning are introduced. The first area is ”Life-long Language Learning,” where the importance of starting at an early age and learning through adulthood is demonstrated. The second area is “”Better Language Teaching,” which focuses on teaching the different languages as well as teacher training. The third and last area that is described is “Building a Language-Friendly Environment.” This area is important because it identifies the importance of language diversity in the European Union, and it values communities where all languages are welcome. The last section of the overall document includes actions that are proposed for the years 2004-2006. This section further describes details about specific actions that can be taken to support the broader areas introduced in the first section.

The structure of the National Language Conference document differs from that of the European Union. The document starts out similarly, detailing the context of the document. The purpose of the document is stated and background information is given. Much attention is given to the “Sputnik” moment and the importance of the second wakeup call, the terrorist attacks of 9/11. This is done in order to contextualize the document’s purpose for supporting language education. In the next section, the document outlines the importance and the urgent need for national leadership to increase the nation’s foreign language capabilities.²⁴ The last section of *A Call to Action for National Foreign Language Capabilities* lists the different actions that were recommended during the National Language Conference. They are as follows: 1. Develop cross-sector language and cultural competency. 2. Engage federal, state, and local government in solutions. 3. Integrate language training across career fields. 4. Develop critical language skills. Some of the languages identified as “critical languages” were Arabic, Urdu, Farsi, and Pashto. 5. Strengthen Teaching capabilities in foreign languages and cultures. 6. Integrate language into education system requirements. 7. Develop and provide instructional materials and technological tools. These are the seven actions that are stated in the document as necessary for the United States to do in order to develop foreign language capabilities.²⁵

The vocabulary and language use of both documents is also important to analyze. It was interesting to see how both of the documents used similar language and vocabulary. The text of both documents was inserted into a word cloud which worked to visualize the words used in the document.

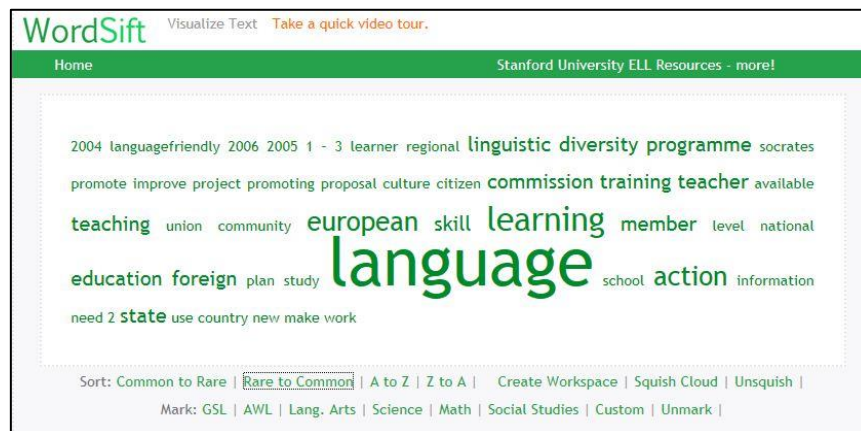


Figure 1. Word cloud created with WordSift, using the text from *Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004-2006*.



Figure 2. Word cloud created with WordSift, using the text from *A Call to Action for National Foreign Language Capabilities*.

It is interesting to see the similarities in the word clouds. Not surprisingly, the most frequent word in both documents was “language.” Other words that also appeared were culture, education, learning, teaching, foreign, government, and action. Many of these words appeared in both of the word clouds. Clearly, vocabulary and language usage are similar across these documents. However, the similarity is a surface phenomenon. They may seem the same and they may promote the same general goal but the outcome is different. Thus, although both documents have some similarities, it can be said the intent and path that the documents take toward second language competence differ.

5. Discussion

The analysis of these documents demonstrates that one document promotes intercultural citizenship more than the other. The European Union’s *Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004-2006* promotes language learning for the purposes of mutual understanding and communication, thus it supports intercultural citizenship the most. In contrast, the United States National Language Conference’s document, *A Call to Action for National Foreign Language Capabilities*, promotes language education for the purposes of national security. It does not do much to encourage language learning for the purposes of cultural understanding and intercultural citizenship. In general, the United States does not do much to promote cultural competence, especially with regard to our neighboring countries. United States federal educational policy does not promote the learning of Spanish, even though Spanish is the most widely spoken language of the Americas. It is important to note this because Mexico and the United States share a complex historical relationship yet, it cannot be said that intercultural citizenship is actively encouraged by the United States (or, for that matter, by Mexico).

There is irony in the fact that the United States National Language Conference called for the need to improve foreign language abilities in the nation, yet, there is no funding to actually work on accomplishing this goal. As far as I was able to find, nobody answered this “call” to action at any level of government. In general, the purpose of the policy recommendations for the U.S. National Language Conference document is misguided. It promotes language learning for the purpose of national security instead of intercultural competence. It can be said that foreign language education called for in this document is viewed as instrumental, just another tool for world dominance and for national security. This document does not focus on creating peace and mutual understanding between neighbors but instead uses language to combat the perceived threats, with citizens viewed as resources for national security. In contrast, the European Union action plan looks at foreign language education as integrative. In this document, language learning is a tool for growth. There is a sense of coming together and mutual understanding from learning each other’s language. This is emphasized in this document and it is a clear example of how the European Union works to promote it amongst its member states.

6. Conclusion

Sweden's achievement in language learning should serve as an example for the United States. Based on the success of Sweden and countries from the European Union foreign language education, I would like to offer some recommendations of what the United States can do to promote language learning and intercultural citizenship. First, it is important to begin learning at an earlier age. Many students in the United States do not begin learning a foreign language until middle or high school. There also needs to be an emphasis on deep cultural learning along with language learning, which would promote cultural understanding and create better global citizens. Another recommendation is to fund and encourage teacher exchanges. This should not only be at the national level, but at the international level where teachers would experience living and learning in a new cultural context. Teacher exchanges are encouraged in the European Union and along with having teacher networks where teachers could connect internationally, this could create more mutual understanding among those teachers and their students.

Study abroad opportunities should be offered for all students. Although many colleges and universities offer these programs, they are not always accessible for everyone, and so this is a problem. Study abroad programs need to be made more accessible for all students. Adult education is also important. The European Union action plan states that language learning should start at an early age and go through adulthood. Adults who would like to learn additional languages should have the opportunity to do so. Overall, there needs to be more governmental involvement in promoting language learning. All levels of government should promote foreign language. The last recommendation is that language learning should be promoted for the purpose of cultural competence and intercultural citizenship and not just for national security. It is very telling that the only document that I was able to find that promotes language learning by the government was done under the leadership of the U.S. Department of Defense whose focus was national security. National security is important of course, but it should not be the only reason for promoting language education.

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