**To what degree should political parties be involved in decisions about language education policy?**

What should we demand of socially responsible language education policy?

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In 2023, West Virginia University (WVU) in the United States decided to discontinue all world language provision, bar a very basic provision, as part of a euphemistically labelled *academic transformation* process. Comments from the chair of the WVU Senate Finance Committee made it clear that the decision was set in the context of a US-wide anti-diversity, equality and inclusion agenda, favouring Anglocentric, homogenised educational values. Arguing, at times, for the need to protect the electorate from “unbridled spending by liberal ‘educators’ [who] created the mess our country’s higher education system [is in]” (Tarr, 2023) and, at other times, for the purported need to provide students with degrees “useful for future jobs”, the WVU pushed through their program of *academic transformation* against public outcry. WVU students organised protests and staff at WVU issued a vote of no confidence in the University’s leadership. The decision caused both national and international controversy.

As Thompson, Chalupa, and Stjepanovic remind us in their anchor piece, *language education policy and planning* (LEP) is, conceptually, a somewhat unusual linguistic endeavour. Most language development and change occurs via dynamic, unpredictable, bottom-up processes, while LEP entails deliberate attempts to direct and shape this process (Shohamy, 2006). Questions such as which language(s) should be learned (if any), by what percentage of students, for how long, to what capacity and, above all, to what purpose, entail decisions relating to strategic societal aims to develop a nation’s collective economic and social wellbeing. Such decisions are never made in contexts free of inequity in language. Any LEP will favour or disfavour specific languages or language varieties, thereby disadvantaging some groups of speakers, while giving preference to others.

LEP-making is anchored in political contexts: it reveals the value a society places on engaging positively with linguistic and cultural ‘otherness’, be it contemporary or historical. LEP-making in Anglophone countries (here defined as countries using English as the official state language and language of education, and where the majority speak it as a first language) assumes special ethical responsibilities in this respect: the history of imperialism and colonialism is intrinsically linked to the global status English enjoys today. It should fall within the remit of LEP to challenge ‘English is enough’ attitudes and the unwillingness to engage with languages and cultures other than English, and to reveal the colonial heritage of such attitudes towards language learners and other stakeholders.

Eroding language learning in the context of an anti-diversity, equality and inclusion agenda, as witnessed in this US context, is a back-handed acknowledgement of the transformational power of language learning. We linguists take this back-handed compliment from those who oppose cultural and linguistic diversity, and who aim to utilize education for the purposes of inciting discord, othering social groups, and widening social and cultural gaps in our communities and beyond. Language pedagogues have long understood that language learning can open our learners’ eyes to seeing the world differently, increase tolerance and understanding, and enhance our learners’ capacities to communicate better across cultural and linguistic differences. It can contribute to social cohesion both within and across communities.

The transformational power of language education comes with social and ethical responsibilities for policymakers. For the linguist (including the educational linguist), purporting to maintain ‘neutrality’ on these issues is obfuscatory. Those denying or ignoring these responsibilities might (inadvertently) contribute to obfuscating rather than clarifying the educational aims behind a LEP, whatever their nature. All education, including the planning thereof, is political (Freire, 1972), in that it aims to prepare future citizens in ways deemed most adept and useful for our societal needs. At its core, democratic processes of shaping education include transparent and open discourses about its aims and its intended societal contribution.

In other words, all shaping of LEP is an inherently political act, be it a policy pertaining to a publicly funded institution such as a state school, or, as in the case that triggered this Perspectives column, a university with somewhat greater independence from direct party political influence. At the conceptual level, it thus seems easy to answer the title question of this contribution swiftly and decisively: LEP makers, hoping to shape their communities and future society for the better, should not only be fully engaged and involved in LEP, but are political actors by definition.

However, the pertinent question is *how* they might do so, and, secondly, how LEP might be devised so as to be accepted and implemented by those enacting LEP, for instance teachers, learners and parents, as well as their wider communities. Specifically, the challenges for devising LEPs in Anglophone countries in a socially and ethically responsible manner concern the following problems:

a) the erosion of provision of programmes for the learning of languages other than English (LOTE);

b) a relatively low willingness to engage in learning LOTE;

c) a poor understanding of rationales for and the significance of foreign language education systems generally.

Increasingly, in Anglophone countries, the provision of LOTE education is becoming eroded; for example, by shortening the prescribed length of compulsory learning of a foreign language and reducing the range of options in the post-compulsory phase (Lanvers, 2017). In tandem with LEPs tolerating or aiding these trends, it has also been observed that those choosing to continue their LOTE education form a self-selected group of students from privileged backgrounds (Lanvers, 2017). Incidentally, a parallel trend can be observed in non-Anglophone countries. Slowly but steadily, involvement in LOTE learning is decreasing, accompanied by a social division among students engaging in learning both English and other languages to an intermediate or higher level, whereby students from advantaged backgrounds engage more in language learning (Lanvers, 2024b). In other words, ‘English is enough’ beliefs (whether relating to first- or second-language acquisition) have infiltrated education systems around the globe. Judging by these trends, it seems that education systems increasingly do not see foreign language competencies as central to a well-rounded education for the majority of today’s students. Like all LEP, the shaping of the policies leading to this dismal state of affairs was also, in each case, a political act.

The discussion so far has led me to identify a number of criteria for the shaping and enacting of LEP:

1. that it be ethically and socially responsible, aiming to redress rather than reinforce social injustices, both past and present;
2. that its aims and rationales are to be debated and negotiated openly and democratically;
3. that its aims and rationales include supporting societal and community cohesion, understanding and tolerance, and countering the discord-fuelling ‘othering’ of certain groups.

In the next section, I draw on several examples of LEP, from both Anglophone and non-Anglophone contexts, that serve to demonstrate how difficult it can be to devise LEPs that adhere to the above desiderata, and how easily any LEP may fall short of its own aims. Any shortfalls in the design and implementation of LEP can easily lead to unintended consequences.

Another way of framing this analysis of LEPs is to ask if deliberately strong *interventionist LEPs*, setting clear (e.g., compulsory) educational goals to determine both the uptake and the outcomes of language learning, might fare better than LEPs that take a more *laissez-faire* approach, giving individual schools, teachers and/or learners freedom to decide on what languages to learn (if any) and to what level. The three examples of (arguably) relative failure in LEP that follow will move from the most familiar to me (England) to the least (Ukraine), each time asking how these policies have fared when measured against the desiderata set out above.

<A>PUTTING LEPS TO THE TEST

### *<B>England*

Education policy-making powers are devolved to the four member states of the UK (England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland). In what follows, I will report on England, where 85% of UK school students reside. Language learning in England is now in its fourth decade of continual decline, and the development of LEP has seen a number of U-turns as well as the ongoing erosion of educational opportunities.

Until 2004, learning a foreign language up to age 16 was compulsory in secondary English state schools (age 11 to 16) but had proved unpopular with many students and parents alike. While the former often felt unmotivated in lessons, many parents feared that the harsher marking of foreign language assessments pulled down their child’s results in the high-stakes examinations taken at age 16 (General Certificate of Secondary Education = GCSE). Set against this backdrop, in 2004, the then Labour government decided to make language learning optional from the age of 14 onwards, in the hope that the (more motivated) students continuing to study a foreign language post-14 would enjoy the experience more, which should ultimately lead to an increased uptake at the 16+ phase. The decision resulted in an immediate and long-lasting decline of foreign language uptake at GCSE level, which has been below 50% of students ever since. The decision, in 2006, to make language learning compulsory at the upper primary level did nothing to ameliorate this. In a further U-turn, in 2011, the then Conservative government introduced educational targets (i.e., ‘Ebacc, European Baccalaureate, a qualification afforded to students who pass at least 5 subjects with good grades age 16’) envisaging that 90% of 16-year-olds sitting their GCSE exams *should* also sit and pass a foreign language GCSE (Lanvers, 2017), but these targets were never enforced. Instead, the percentage of students sitting a language GCSE has hovered below 50% for the last two decades.

It is important to note that this confusing array of more *laissez-faire* (2004, 2011) and more interventionist (2011) LEPs were never explicitly designed, by either of the political parties that initiated them, to erode language provision. Rather, the policies were intended either to improve the learner experience and learning outcomes, albeit at the cost of comprehensive language education (2004 LEP), or to increase uptake generally (2006 and 2011 LEPs). By all measures, these LEPs have failed.

What went wrong?

In an effort to understand this better, it pays to recall a language-related issue that arose in the context of Brexit in 2016, when teachers reported that students (and their parents and wider communities) showed a further decline in their (already low) motivation to pursue language learning. In their eyes, learning the languages of the UK’s neighbours had become (even more) superfluous, as the UK was preparing itself for a more insular and Anglocentric future. Economists were quick to point out this fallacy, arguing that good foreign language capacities would, in fact, be in increasing demand as the UK sought to rekindle friendly relations with its neighbours. However, the point of interest here is not to what extent such utilitarian arguments may hold up against firm evidence. What is noteworthy is that such utilitarian rationales were the only ones that emerged in public debates concerning Brexit (Lanvers et al., 2018).

This discussion has revealed more than typical ‘English is enough’ beliefs, common in Anglophone contexts. It has also revealed a fundamental lack of clarity and understanding about what language learning in school education should, can, and cannot deliver. Neither end users, such as learners, nor the public at large are to blame if the policies themselves lack this clarity. Ever since their inception, utilitarian justifications for language education during (compulsory) schooling years have been subject to the following dilemma: on the one hand, schooling years alone generally do not equip learners with the level language proficiency needed for full-blown utilitarian purposes (e.g., conducting post-Brexit commercial negotiations). On the other hand, such rationales have been favoured by some educationalists as more accessible and motivational than the ‘cultural enrichment’ type of arguments, historically associated with elitist language learning (Lanvers, 2024ba). In England’s policy documents, this dilemma is obfuscated by, on the one hand, the foregrounding of utilitarian rationales and, on the other, the setting of learning outcome targets so low (compared to similar neighbouring countries; Lanvers, 2024a) that learners, even with the best intentions to learn for the much lauded utilitarian purposes, would struggle to use their language for such purposes. Thus, many learners remain confused as to the ultimate purpose of language learning and, at every opportunity provided by England’s *laissez-faire* LEP, opted out rather than in. Nonetheless, a minority of UK learners (and Anglophones more generally) *do* identify both moral arguments for learning languages in the context of Global English and the societal benefits thereof (Lanvers, 2017), but these are barely reflected in England’s LEP rationales and debates. In other words, the policy misses opportunities to engage with criteria 1 and 3, and completely misses out on criterion 2.

A more promising way to engage and convince Anglophones in particular of the benefits of language learning would be to home in on the societal as well as personal (non-material) benefits of language learning. Arguments might focus on cultural and intellectual enrichment, cognitive stimulation, social cohesion and intercultural communicative competence, and, above all, the opportunity to prepare learners for lifelong language learning, focusing on generic and transferable language learning skills (Lanvers, 2024a). Such rationales have the benefit of being inclusive and accessible to all learners, offering motivational incentives for Anglophones to learn a wide range of languages, including those spoken in the very multilingual situation of the UK itself.

***<B>****European Union*

A second somewhat different example concerns the LEP of the European Union. The education policy of the EU remains advisory, as implementation falls within the remit of its 27 member states or the political entities (polities) within them (e.g., in Germany, the 16 German *Länder*). It is thus *laissez-faire* by necessity. The European Commission’s 1995 White Paper *Teaching and Learning –Towards the Learning Society* declared that every European should become proficient *in two foreign European languages* (in addition to their mother tongue), an objective to be reached by the end of formal schooling. The policy was implemented in 2002. Rationales for this LEP are focused on instrumental as well as non-material social benefits: fostering linguistic diversity, European citizenship, and a knowledge-based economy. So far, the LEP has met some of the key criteria set out in the introduction. The problem, however, lies in its implementation, as member states (and their educational institutions) have proven far more concerned with developing English competencies, to the detriment of those in a second foreign language (Lanvers, 2024b). In other words, a variant of the ‘English is enough’ belief (i.e., ‘mother tongue plus English is enough’), is infiltrating and diluting the European LEP at the level where it matters most, the implementation stage. Learners themselves, given the choice to continue an additional LOTE or drop it, tend to opt for the latter, while members of the European parliament show few signs of supporting the implementation of the 1+2 policy in their member states. Here we see a policy aiming high in terms of criteria 1 and 3, but failing to engage its citizens (criterion 2), at the level of local and regional implementation.

### *<B>Ukraine*

Russia has a long-standing history of attempting to suppress the use of Ukrainian in Ukraine, both before and since that country’s independence. In the context of the recent full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine, language policy has become a major site for acting out political tension (Lunyova et al., 2023). In 2022, the Ukrainian parliament forbade the use of any Russian in public, in media and in all teaching contexts except that of foreign language teaching (Bill 7633). However, about a third of Ukrainian nationals speak Russian as their first language and, for this reason, the policy has been met with sharp international criticism from, among others, the UN Security Council and Human Rights Watch. Here we see a policy deeply motivated by a strong moral stance (criterion 1) that has the potential to exacerbate internal social conflict, thus falling foul of criterion 3.

## <A>CONCLUSION

In this contribution, I have cited the example of a LEP (i.e., England) that lacks a coherent rationale with which end users might identify and understand. I have also given the example of a well-justified policy (i.e., European Union; at least in terms of criteria 1 and 3) that has not, at time of writing, been implemented as intended. A further LEP (i.e., Ukraine), developed out of a strong moral stance grounded in a regard for justice and equity, risks marginalising significant minority language speaker groups. Clearly, even the most socially and ethically responsible LEPs may fail at the implementation stage if not embraced by end users and stakeholders. Successful implementation of LEP cannot do without listening to, and engaging with, the grassroots. If this had been allowed to occur at the time of the WVU language programme closure, the outcome would undoubtedly have been different. The local, national and, indeed, international protests are testimony to this.

LEP makers need to be subjected to a process of ‘checks and balances’ from the bottom up and, at times, from the top down. The latter is exemplified in Ukraine, where the drastic curtailment of all use of Russian was rightly criticised by international organisations for its violation of minority rights. At times, situations of extreme political violence may seem to justify the formulation of draconian LEP, but neglecting the ethical dimension (criterion 1) is highly likely to prove counter-productive in the longer run. For LEP to be democratic, *all* stakeholders, first and foremost learners and their communities, must have their voice.

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