Bilingual education in Alsace

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1. Introduction

1.1. Alsace occupies a very special position among linguistic minorities in Europe. In less than a century it has changed its nationality no less than four times and at every occurrence both the French and the Germans were eager to directly influence and manipulate the linguistic habits of the Alsatians. The measures devised on that behalf always drew heavily on laws and regulations concerning the educational system (Bister-Broosen, 1998).

Three linguistic and communication systems are presently coexisting in the Alsace area: standard French, standard German and Alsatian dialects. Native speakers are only to be found of the first and the last code. Whatever competence in standard German Alsatians have has been acquired by learning German as a foreign language. Most people socialized in an Alsatian dialect have acquired mastery of standard French in very much the same way, i.e. as a foreign language as well (all Alsatians do indeed have at least some knowledge of French). People socialized in French, on the other hand, often have no more than a passive knowledge of Alsatian, if at all (Bister-Broosen, 1996: 138-139). French is the official prestige language, standard German is used almost exclusively for written purposes and the Alsatian dialects are mainly used orally (Bister-Broosen, 1997: 306).

An enquiry carried out by the polling institute Iserco in a representative sample of the Alsatian population of all generations revealed that in Alsace overall 70.7% of the population “are able to speak Alsatian” (Dernières Nouvelles d’Alsace, 15 March 1990). More thorough investigations, including questions as to the domains in which, and the interlocutors with whom, Alsatian is used, usually yield much more alarming returns, showing a rapid decline of the use of the language. In Bister-Broosen (1996), based on an investigation among youngsters (15-19 years of age) in 1989, it is reported that, although 54% of the informants claim mastery of the Alsatian dialect, the use they make of Alsatian is minimal. The family, it appears:

is the only domain in which dialect use is still considerable; within that domain it is conversation with the grandparents [...] The informants almost never use their dialect proficiency in public settings or formal domains [...] it is hardly ever used with siblings and with peers. (Bister-Broosen, 1996: 154)

These findings are corroborated by other investigations, e.g. Harnisch (1996) and Vassberg (1993).

1.2. The future of a minority language depends to a large extent on how it is treated in the education system. According to Philipps (1980: 90) and many other authors, the insufficient amount of German and/or Alsatian instruction is one of the paramount reasons for the present

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decline of the language of the Alsatians in this part of France. Yet, during recent years major changes have been introduced in the Alsatian education system, providing elementary schools with three different types of German language instruction. In this paper we intend to describe, analyze and evaluate those changes and programs in depth. We will start, therefore, with a short overview of the past history of German language instruction in the Alsatian school system. Yet, we want to stress, that our interest in the Alsatian bilingual education project is not only language politically motivated. Consequently, we will not only discuss the efficiency of the program but also try to analyze it against the background of an official French educational policy having tried to keep German out of Alsatian classrooms for decades and decades.

2. Past History

2.1. The major part of Alsace belongs to France since the Peace Treaty of Westphalia (1648), when the French king Louis XIV annexed most of the region. There was no real language policy during the whole time of the monarchy.

2.2. The first real change occurred after the French Revolution (1789), the new revolutionary leaders being the first to try to thoroughly galicize the Alsatian population at large. Since they saw the propagation of French as one of the major revolutionary tasks, they intended to provide the subjects of all parts of France with a uniform language (Willeynych, 1997: 57). The consequences of the school system reform of 1793 (every commune in France had to provide a French language primary school education at no cost), were small mainly because of the lacking of the basic prerequisites, viz. sufficient teachers and students mastering the French language. On the other hand French substituted German as the language of instruction in high schools and universities from 1808 onward. Thus, although the role of French in primary schools remained marginal for a long time still, in high schools and universities it acquired a strong position as of the first third of the 19th century.

2.3. During the “Second Empire” (1850-1870) we witness a very intensive and systematic propaganda campaign on behalf of the use of the French language in Alsace. One of its vital components was the policy of school authorities to intensify French language instruction to the point of almost completely ousting German. The churches, on the other hand, continued to consider German as the most important tool of instruction in their primary schools, with French as a necessary and important complement. The success of boarding schools for girls accounted for a rapid progress of French amongst the middle class (Hartweg, 1989).

2.4. As a consequence of the Franco-German war the peace treaty of Frankfurt (1871) returned Alsace (and Lorraine) to Germany, as a “Reichsland”, in which, of course, the linguistic situation changed thoroughly. In primary schools German replaced French as the medium of instruction and on all other school levels German gradually became the habitual language of instruction as well. In Strasbourg a new German university was founded. The censuses of 1900, 1905 and 1910 show that 94% of the Alsatian population indicated German to be their “mother tongue” (Denis & Veltman, 1989).

2.5. As soon as the Versailles Treaty (1918) re-annexed Alsace and Lorraine to France, the French authorities were very determined to start a policy of systematic assimilation, intended to Frenchify the Alsatian population at large once and for all. Since the main “weapon” in this Gallicization policy was to be the school, the strong opposition from the side of the Alsatian population against the new language policy was mainly concentrated on the French education measures which were based on the following principles (Hartweg, 1984): a) French was to be the sole language of instruction; b) most of the “local” teachers were forced to complete training periods in France, in order to obtain or to keep their teaching license; c) the so-called “méthode directe” was officially introduced: it meant that without consideration for their actual situation, Alsatian students were considered to be in no different linguistic position than their colleagues in the rest of France and to have French as their mother tongue (this is why, very soon, they were called “the lost generation”).

After a fierce opposition, instruction in German was reintroduced and started in the second semester of the second year. Yet, it was generally felt that actually neither language really profited from this kind of situation. An Alsatian member of the French Senate described the situation in the following way: “The children are taught a language they don’t understand, and the language they do understand is not taught” (Hartweg, 1984). Consequently, the compulsory measures of the French were responsible for a situation which has been labeled as “le malaise alsacien” [the Alsatian malaise], referring to a condition of linguistic insecurity. On the one hand, competence in High German ceased to be that of a native speaker while the usage of the dialect was frowned upon; on the other hand, reaching a workable competence in French appeared to be an impossible goal for most Alsatians since no language didactic measures were introduced to help them.

2.6. In 1940 Alsace was taken over by the Nazis and their language policy mirrored their general policy: it was ruthless and brutal. It was decreed that German was to be the only language authorized to be used in official domains, including the school system. According to Stephens (1978: 351) Nazism probably “did more for the French cause in Alsace than all the French patriots in Paris up to 1939”.

2.7. After World War II, and for the first time in Alsatian history, the German language was banned from Alsatian schools altogether in order to, as it was phrased “allow the French language to recuperate the ground it had lost during the war” (Akten, 1989: 74). At the same time the language policy of the French became both more subtle, yet more harsh than ever before. A campaign was launched, using the slogan “C’est chic de parler français” [to speak French is chic] (Beyer, 1989: 295), meant to appeal to the desire for social integration and assimilation of those striving to become part of the powerful and the rich, of the important and “chic” people. Upward social mobility, it was indicated unmistakably, would only be possible through speaking to French! All of this was corroborated by harsh linguistic legislation: High German was completely banned from the school system. Also, it was taken care of that in kindergarten, a preschool system that was introduced simultaneously, using the dialect was made impossible and even punished. Parents of dialect speaking children were officially warned that, if they wanted to prevent their children from being expelled from school, they had to make sure that they became French speaking overnight. This “direct method”, as it was called, although pedagogically completely absurd, yet appeared to be politically very successful, even if the consequence was that the “Alsatian malaise” (insufficient competence in both languages) was intensified still. Another characteristic, yet immensely stupid slogan during this campaign was the continuously repeated: “Oubliez chaque jour un mot de dialecte et apprenez un nouveau mot de français” [Forget a dialect word every day and acquire a French word instead!]. For most parents this was reason enough to switch to French since they feared that socializing their children in the dialect “would lead to discrimination in the classroom and would jeopardize academic success” (Hartweg, 1984: 1967).

It was only in 1952 that German was reintroduced as an optional subject in the two final classes of the primary school in those villages “where the Alsatian dialect was still used as the main means of communication” (Hartweg, 1981: 101). It was only after the extension of compulsory instruction to 16 years during the sixties, that a majority of youngsters had regular access to German language instruction again (Kleinclauss, 1995).
3. A new education policy

3.1. In 1972 the Ministère de l'Éducation introduced, on a trial basis, the so-called “audiovisual Holderith-Method”, which aimed at making the acquisition of High German easier through the medium of the Alsatian dialect. This method was gradually expanded and initially the results were quite satisfactory, i.e. as long as the Alsatian dialect was the mother tongue of almost all students, and as long as the majority of the teachers still displayed a perfect command of the German standard language. In 1975 the “Haby”-law made it possible to officially organize courses in “regional language and culture” in France at large. Yet, the Recteur of the Academy of Strasbourg (in France all state schools are under the authority of the Recteurs de l’Académie) waited until June 1982, to issue a circular “to promote the use of dialect from kindergarten onward” (Dennis & Veltman, 1989: 17).

3.2. It is only during recent years that a much more important and fundamental change finally occurred. The amount of speaking-children and of teachers with a sufficient command of High German having dramatically diminished, the German language instruction as offered by the Holderith method could not be successful anymore. In 1980, therefore, advocates of Alsatian had urged the French Minister of Education to create a new and double system which, apart from German language instruction of 3 hours a week in all schools and starting in kindergarten, would also provide bilingual instruction to start in the first class of kindergarten, in which German would be the language of instruction during half of the week and French during the other half. Both demands were denied by the Ministry of Education.

In 1990 parents once more strongly demanded this type of bilingual education and, once again, the demand was rejected. An organization called “ABC-M-Zweisprachigkeit” (= “Association pour le bilinguisme dès la classe maternelle” [Association for the advancement of bilingual education starting from kindergarten onward]) was founded and drafted a project for the organization of so-called “associative bilingual classes” (Kleinclaus, 1995). In September 1992 the French Ministry of Education finally agreed to start with a bilingual education system itself and, simultaneously, to significantly increase the number of schools in which German language instruction of three weekly hours would be provided. On 7 January 1993 bilingual instruction on a larger scale was introduced: in the “enseignement bilingue paritaire” German and French each are the medium of instruction for half of the week (13 hours). At the beginning of the school year 1995 the state school system in Alsace totaled 73 bilingual classes (as compared to an overall total of approximately 7000 classes), attended by some 1500 students; 157 classes with 2951 students were providing 6 weekly hours of German language instruction (CRA, 1995). Yet, not only new bilingual classes, set up in several places, would increase the number of students, it would also increase automatically as the students advanced from one class to the next one.

At the start of the school year 2001-2002, the amount of bilingual classes in the elementary state school system in Alsace had risen to 357, and the number of students to 8000. The system currently works both in kindergarten and in elementary school classes; 632 students attend bilingual classes in the “collèges” (= secondary schools) (Land un Sprooch 140, 2001: 11-12). The ABCM-system currently has 860 students in 41 classes in 11 different places (Land un Sprooch 139, 2001: 10-12). A new contract between the French Republic and the “region” for the period 2000-2006 intends to “make possible a real language policy in the field of instruction and the media”. It holds, among other things, that all of Alsace’s 130 “collège”-regions will have at least one bilingual school by 2006 and teacher training colleges will provide at least 50 new teachers specialized in bilingual instruction every year (Land un Sprooch Hör Série # 4, 2002:25).

Before discussing this in some more detail, we want to provide some information as to the way the French school system is organized (based on Auduc & Bayard-Pierlot, 1995). In France the kindergarten and primary school levels are combined into one level, the first cycle of which is called the “cycle des apprentissages premiers” and comprises the first and the second year of the “pre-elementary school” (“maternelle”). Its first class is called “P.S.” (Petite section, for 2 or 3 year olds), its second one the “M.S.” (Moyenne section, for 4 year olds). The second cycle combines the third year of the pre-elementary school (called “G.S.” i.e. “Grande section”, for 5 year olds), with the first and second year of the elementary school. Its first class, called “CP” i.e. “Cours préparatoire”, constitutes the first year of compulsory education (for 6 year olds); its second class is the CE1 (“cours élémentaire”, for 7 year olds). The third cycle comprises the third (CE2) year (“cours élémentaire” for 8 year olds), the fourth (CM1) year (“cours moyen” for 9 year olds) and the fifth (CM2) year (second “cours moyen” for 10 year olds) of the elementary school. This cycle is called the “cycle des approfondissements” The “Collège” then, constitutes the first cycle of secondary education. Its first class (for 11 year olds) is called “sixième”, then follow the “cinquième”, “quatrième” and “troisième”. In principle the “sixième” is the class in which the instruction of a first foreign language is started (LV1), the second one then starting in the “quatrième” (LV2). The “Lycée”, finally, groups the “seconde”, the “première” and the “terminale” (final class) at the end of which the exam for the “baccalauréat” (graduation from High School) can be taken.

3.3. The original contract on the practicalities and the financing of the system between the French Ministry of Education and the Alsatian “Region” stresses the importance of drawing on the already existing “natural bilingualism”, along with extending the “secondary bilingualism” (Baetens-Beardsmore, 1986) by means of an appropriate instruction. It states the following priorities:

a) The further development of bilingual instruction in both kindergarten and elementary school.
b) The generalization of early German language instruction.
c) The establishment of “trilingual and European” sections (i.e. featuring a supplementary foreign language).
d) The enhancement of the proficiency in German as a “general and job related language”;

e) The “renovation” of the optional subject “regional language and culture” (i.e. Alsatian) in High School.

In order to improve the teacher training which is seen as essential and decisive for the success of this enterprise a training center for bilingual instruction has been set up in Guebwiller (“Centre de formation aux enseignements bilingues”). It is the first one in France ever and as a pilot project it benefited from all financial means necessary to guarantee its good functioning. The investment has been financed by the Alsatian “Région” and both “Départements”. The overhead expenses were paid for by the French state and the “Centre” functions in close collaboration with the teacher training department of the university of Strasbourg. The “Centre” was officially inaugurated in May 1996.

4. Structure and methodology

4.1. Currently the following systems of German language teaching are in existence in Alsatian pre-elementary and elementary schools.

4.1.1. The three hour program

a) Is now offered from level CE2 onward in all schools under the authority of the Strasbourg “Académie” as well as in some classes of the second cycle. The plans were to
make them available to all classes in this cycle as soon as possible. According to official figures it did exist in 97% of all primary schools in 2002.

b) The objective is that the German language instruction be given by the regular class teacher. If s/he is not able or willing to do so, another teacher from the same school, a neighboring school or from outside (e.g. from Germany) will be given the assignment.

c) The continuation of German language instruction in all high schools is guaranteed: starting from the first high school year onward German can be chosen as the first “foreign” language. The most advanced students are also given the opportunity to start with a supplementary foreign language right away.

4.1.2. The six hour program

a) Both in the pre-elementary and in elementary schools some class activities are conducted in German and/or some subjects are taught in that language.

b) Alphabetization starts in French but very soon German is incorporated in the reading lessons (starting from CP or during CE1).

c) In those regions where Alsatian is still widely used Standard German will be replaced by Alsatian “in order to facilitate the natural and gradual transition to Standard German in the elementary school” (quoted from a brochure issued by the departmental administration in Colmar).

d) The final goal is an “intensified learning” of the German language.

4.1.3. The bilingual instruction

a) Both in the pre-elementary and in elementary schools half of the class activities are conducted and half of the subjects are taught in German.

b) Alphabetization starts in French but very soon German is incorporated in the reading lessons (starting from CP or during CE1).

c) In those regions where Alsatian is still widely used Standard German will be replaced by Alsatian in pre-elementary schools “in order to facilitate the natural and gradual transition to Standard German in the elementary school”.

d) The final goal is to reach an equal competence in both French and German by the end of the elementary school, based on the principles and methods of “natural language acquisition”.

4.2. Furthermore it is intended to bring the children in contact with native speakers of Standard German as soon and as often as possible, e.g. through school, class and teacher exchanges. Since the cooperation of parents is essential, parents who are able to do so are advised to use Alsatian with their offspring as often as possible, to provide them with German language books and papers and to have them watch German language television programs regularly. Also, parents are encouraged to grant their children the opportunity of participating in immersion stays in German language environments.

The major conditions for successful bilingual instruction are seen to be the following:

a) It has to start as early as possible.

b) A maximum of contact hours: both languages must necessarily be used every day and to the same amount, in order for the “immersion effect” to reach its highest possible impact.

c) The “one language-one teacher” principle: both languages have to be used and taught by different teachers.

d) Strong support in the family.

5. Evaluation and results

As far as the “ABCM-Zweisprachigkeit”-schools are concerned, evaluations confirmed very early on that bilingually instructed children were achieving better, not only in general but even for French, than those enlisted in monolingual classes to which they were compared. The same applied to other subjects, as e.g. mathematics, the reports say (Klein, 1995).

As of today there are no more major pedagogical differences left between the ABCM-classes and the state schools. Yet, in the pre-ABCM-classes the activities in German are scheduled in the morning, i.e. at the time of the day which is most favorable for second language instruction. In the bilingual classes of state schools this is not the case: French and German language activities are scheduled alternately in the morning and in the afternoon. Furthermore in ABCM-schools as a rule instruction in German is given by native speakers. In state schools this appears not to be possible because teachers have to be appointed on the basis of the results of the national teachers exam for France at large. Furthermore, the ABCM schools also try to enhance the children’s proficiency in the Alsatian regional variety (“le dialecte”, as it is called) of German (Land un Sproch 139, 2001: 10-12).

In the Alsatian state schools a yearly and very thorough evaluation is carried out by the academy’s Commission académique d’évaluation de l’enseignement des langues (CRA, 1995). For the three systems involved, the competence in German as well as the competence in French and mathematics has been thoroughly evaluated.

Summarizing the various commissions’ early findings we see that here too bilingual instruction not only leads to a larger competence in German but to better achievements in French and mathematics as well (Land un Sproch 121, 1996: 12). Consequently, both for pedagogical and educational purposes the system ought to be expanded and generalized as soon as possible. Subsequent evaluations always signaled progress for the mastery of German as well as French, as compared to the preceding years. In general the comparison between students of the bilingual and the monolingual system always goes to the detriment of the latter.

6. Immersion?

The current experiments with early bilingual instruction are not only in line with the wishes and the intentions of the Alsatian population but also with those of the regional political leadership. The evaluation of results has demonstrated that the system seems to guarantee better school performances, not only as far as German language competence, but also as far as general cognitive competence and the mastery of the French language are concerned. Yet, research during recent years has demonstrated that the efficiency of bilingual educational systems and/or methodologies aimed at introducing bi- or multilingual skills is determined by the concrete goals one wants to achieve. Whenever it is the target to enlarge the competence in a less prestigious language, some kind of immersion method is probably the most adequate one (Vils, 1996). In Alsace, though, to demand a school system in which the early instruction would be solely in German may not be politically realistic. According to an inquiry of 1999 71% of the interrogated are not in favor of a “total immersion system” in Alsatian schools. Recent developments in France at large make this less probably still. An agreement signed in May 2001 by the then French Minister of Education Jack Lang and the President of the Breton Language Divan schools to integrate the Breton immersion schools into the French State education system has been suspended by the State Council (Conseil d’Etat) a few months later (on 30th October 2001).

This was in answer to appeals lodged by the Comité National d’Action Latique, which represents various teachers’ unions and a parents’ organization. According to its lawyers, this immersion method “undermines the Republic’s principle of equality and unity”. On 27th
December 2001 the whole concept of integration of the immersion system suffered another setback when the “Constitutional Council” questioned the constitutional validity of the teaching of regional languages by immersion. In April 2002 Minister Jack Lang has published new texts: the use of Breton outside the classroom was no longer obligatory but only “encouraged” and participation in the program would be on a voluntary basis. Yet, once again on July 15th 2002, the “Conseil d’État” has rejected the integration of the Diwan schools into the French State education system, the main argument being that immersion was in contradiction with the law of August 4th, 1994, according to which “le français est la langue de l’enseignement” (French is the language of instruction in France) (Sven-Myer, 2002: 5).

It is not clear what the consequences of all this will be for the bilingual instruction systems since they as well have been, from the very beginning, strongly opposed by teachers’ unions.

At any rate, the new educational policy in Alsace is a fundamentally new and very laudable orientation of the official policy, which will considerably enhance the chances of young Alsatians to acquire bilingual competence. The existence of ever more generations displaying an ever growing bilingual competence in French and Standard German is a thrilling perspective indeed (also viewed within the framework of European unification) and one can only hope that Alsatian and French politicians and school authorities will not only continue their present bilingual policy, but will enlarge it and quicken its pace.

7. Concluding remarks

7.1. The generalization of bilingual instruction would be completely in line with what the majority of the Alsatian population has been claiming for a long time, according to an opinion poll carried out by Isesco in 1989 (a complete overview of the results in Land un Sprach 96, 1990: 10-11). 66% of the interviewees (and 76.5% of those speaking Alsatian) were claiming an “official language statute”, as well as “a legally established recognition of the regional language and its rights alongside the French language of the nation”. For 74% a generalized French-German (meaning both High German and Alsatian) bilingual statute ought to be introduced as soon as possible. As to the school system, 81% of the respondents were in favor of bilingual education in the elementary school, 77% in high schools and 62% in kindergarten. Furthermore, 60% were convinced that “a more appropriate training for teachers of the regional language and culture” was absolutely necessary, all of which corroborates the commissions’ opinions mentioned above.

7.2. As far as the possible influence on the general linguistic situation in Alsace is concerned the relevant question is whether it is reasonable to expect that the educational changes discussed in this paper could support the continuation or the reintroduction of general bilingual skills in Alsace at large. The loss of the Alsatian mother tongue is already so widely advanced and the possibilities of use for Alsatian or Standard German in official domains are so restricted (Bister-Broesen, 1996: 145-153), that even a generalization of bilingual instruction is rather unlikely to bring about any consequential changes, the more so since a revival of the Alsatian dialects has never been the purpose of the policy makers who introduced the bilingual education system in the first place. Also, since young Alsatians do not clearly realize what the relationship between Alsatian dialects and Standard German is (Bister-Broesen, 1997), increasing High German competence will not stop or slow down the ongoing monolingualization of communication, not even if bilingual instruction were to be extended to all schools or if an Alsace-wide immersion system were to be installed. The two main reasons for that are, as we indicated before, that Alsatian youngsters clearly identify with France and its national language and that there are hardly any domains left for Standard German (except tourism), a language variety they clearly consider to be a foreign language

7.3. Officially the French Republic is a monolingual state in which no minority languages exist. The ultimate consecration of this fiction has been the adoption by the French parliament on June 25, 1992 of the constitutional amendment: “La langue de la République est le français”. The Conseil Régional d’Alsace restricted its reaction to unanimously approving, on May 5, 1992, a motion, asking among other things “that France might, as soon as possible, accept a modern legislation to guarantee and protect its linguistic diversity”. Yet, it is clear that minority languages do exist in France (and not only in Alsace), but that, based on the constitution, they lack protection and even the acknowledgment of their very existence. The hope that was raised after France had signed the Council of Europe’s European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in May 1999 faded away when France’s Constitutional Council made clear that the French had no intention to also ratify the Charter (Larvor, 2000: 1). Yet, as Woeherling (2000: 21) states: France will never be able to stick to its reputation of the land of freedom if it continues to refuse to incorporate into that freedom also “the cultural rights of which linguistic rights are an essential part”.

7.4. In modern industrial states the position of minority languages is extremely threatened. If they are not backed by solid political structures and the firm conviction of their speakers that they ought to survive and play an important role and, most of all, if they don’t have a legally protected, clearly defined function alongside the national language, their future doesn’t look very bright.

Alsatian dialects do not enjoy any official support (to put it mildly), have no official functions, are not particularly cherished by the majority of their speakers and are hardly used by the younger generations anymore. Also, Willeynys (1997: 64) remarks:

a minority language, structurally and functionally impoverished and no longer supported by innovating ‘injections’ from a genetically related standard language, stands no chance against the domestic majority language and, thus, gradually vanishes.

7.5. The supporters and advocates of Alsatian (e.g. the René Schickele-Gesellschaft – Association) are trying very hard to keep up their spirits and spread a message of optimism (as André Weckmann put it: Allez, Frénd: noch nie nix vom Prinzip Hoffnung geheh – Come on friends: don’t give up hope!). Yet, the only thing they can do is to proceed in a defensive way and to try to slow down a bit the process they can hardly influence, let alone stop. Their main strategy, that of encouraging bilingual competence (in French and High German) may, and probably will, be beneficial to the careers of many young Alsatians, but will not significantly interfere with the ongoing process of loss of the Alsatian dialects to the benefit of Standard French.

Bibliographical references


European Community, 295-303.


