

## Working session 1: the organisation of foreign language teaching

This session was chaired by Mr Olle Josephson and co-chaired by Mrs Pirkko Nuolijärvi. Mr Josephson opened the session by stating that he wished the proposed Brussels Declaration on Foreign Language Learning to be included in the discussion, and he proposed that the following points be debated:

- 1) The progress of English at the expense of other languages;
- 2) How to do language teaching (language teaching education);
- 3) General attitudes, motivation, ideology. Why do we learn foreign languages?
- 4) Languages learnt at school versus languages learnt later on;
- 5) The understanding of the 1 + > 2 goal.

Mr Josephson mentioned that in most countries curricula offer a rich choice of languages. How can we combine a good knowledge of English with stimulating other languages?

In the ensuing discussion a number of speakers argued that the *sequence* of languages taught should be considered carefully. As it is, English is always the first foreign language, and since it is in many situations enough to use this language, there is insufficient motivation for learning a second foreign language. This situation could be avoided if another language than English were selected as the first foreign language; there would still be time enough for English subsequently. This language could be French, for example, and even Latin was proposed (because it is allegedly more of a challenge, for structural reasons).

Other speakers argued that it is unrealistic to select another language than English as the first foreign language; there would be massive protests, and politicians would be sure to block it. The spread of English was described as one of the most important social movements during the last fifty years. We should not turn EFNIL into an organisation trying to turn the tide; that would be an unwarranted piece of ideology which might give us a bad name. The question which needs to be tackled is what means we have got and what we can hope to achieve.

A third group of speakers pointed out that national language institutions are often responsible for promoting their language internationally, and that is difficult to combine with the 1 + > 2 goal if the standard situation is a troika of foreign languages consisting of English, French and German. There is a need for reciprocity between European languages, and here EFNIL could contribute, for example by promoting the publication of bilateral dictionaries of lesser spoken languages (e.g. Dutch-Estonian).

Attention was by some speakers drawn to the importance of the parents of pupils. Many of these claim a stronger role for English. Since parents are interested in foreign language teaching and have power, it is important to get through to them with good arguments in favour of considering other languages as the first foreign language. A likely problem which needs to be solved, however, is the relative scarcity of teachers qualified to teach other languages than English, particularly the lesser spoken ones.

There were also comments on the following sentence from the Brussels declaration: “[...] the activities of each national language institute can no longer be restricted to its own official language(s) but [should be] directed towards plurilingual Europeans in multilingual Europe.” It was objected that the most important task of national language institutes is to promote their own national language, and that they may be required by law to do exclusively that.

At the end of the session a speaker argued that it is unproductive to debate whether English is weakening other languages and that EFNIL should instead try to single out the best ways in which to promote foreign languages. What we need to find out is where this goal is reached and why.