A Linguistic Perspective of EU's Rethinking Education Program and Its Implications*

LIU Xu-liang

China Youth University of Political Studies, Beijing, China

As a key objective of Rethinking Education, multi-linguistic skill is becoming increasingly important for the future European workers as well as the common folks. Being able to communicate in at least one foreign language is considered to be critical for the future talents against EU's vast linguistic diversity and increasing integration. It is widely acknowledged that language competence facilitates mobility, employability, active assimilation, as well as personal development of the individuals, especially the young people, therefore, it is given top priority in the *Europe 2020* strategy for growth and employment. This paper is intended to explore the strength of the rethinking program from a linguistic perspective and offer some inspirations to domestic foreign language education reform.

Keywords: foreign language, Rethinking Education, objectives and initiatives, enlightments and implications

Introduction

In recent years, the unemployment rate in EU has been staying at a high level. On the other hand, job vacancy rate is staggering and expanding. All these show schools failed to impart students the right professional skills required by the labor market. The educational institutes need to rethink and reflect on their training system. Apart from the basic abilities like reading and mathematics, more importance should be attached to the working skills including foreign language, computer, entrepreneurship, etc.

Defining the Scheme of "Rethinking Education"

"Rethinking Education" is an education development and action plan released by the European Commission in 2012 with an aim to promote regional economic growth and enhance international competitiveness for the next decade. It was launched to support the ET2020 strategy (The Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training) which pinpointed and highlighted the weakness of European education and training system in providing the skills needed for the future labor market. The plan encourages the adoption of the most innovative education and training ideas and techniques and offers a variety of supporting programs, through which people obtain the necessary assistance and get fully prepared for future employment and cross-cultural exchanges. One major task of this project is to mobilize member states to help adults improve their professional skills and participate in lifelong learning. In short, this action plan will enable the European citizens to meet the demand for

* **Acknowledgements:** Academic Innovation Supporting Research Project by China Youth University of Political Studies.
LIU Xu-liang, associate professor, master, Foreign Language Department, China Youth University of Political Studies.

the right skills in the future and reduce the unemployment rate and finally promote the entire European integration.

The Causes Supporting Rethinking Education

Along with the advance of knowledge economy, knowledge, and skills are becoming decisive in productivity and efficiency. Workers' education level and labor skills determine the potential of Europe to improve productivity and competitiveness in the future. By 2020, the EU's job vacancy requiring higher education is expected to reach 34%, along with a substantial reduction in the job demanding low-skills. More and more Europeans are likely to have an ever-changing and diverse career. Education and training providers should reflect on this new change to provide support for flexible adjustments of work and life. Currently, over 70 million adults in European Union had only a low level of education, and more than half of the adult population in nine member states have no or low computer skills. The increasing demand for high skilled workers is becoming unprecedentedly urgent and poses a great challenge to European nations. Whether people can acquire relevant skills for the future employment and successfully land a position in the labor market is becoming a common concern. In this context, foreign language skill becomes one of the most important skills. Either occupational mobility or cross cultural exchanges will require considerable language skills. Bad language skill is bound to constitute an obstacle to the free movement of workers and undermine the international competitiveness of EU companies. According to statistics, more than half of the residents of EU member states only communicate in one language. And in schools, only 42% of the students can use the first foreign language independently, and only a quarter of a second foreign language, the background of which is only 14% students in France received secondary low levels of foreign language education, and only 9% in the UK. Multi-linguistic skills contribute to the promotion of workers' mobility and improve the employability of the labor force in Europe. And the more integrated the Union becomes, the more critical and urgent for multi-linguistic skills. Language education as an important part of Rethinking Education caters to the need to provide technical support for cross-border movement of personnel in the new era. Achieving language proficiency objectives will greatly contribute to Europe 2020 growth and employment strategic target.

Linguistic Objectives and Initiatives of "Rethinking Education" Reform

From the outset of Rethinking Education, EU set clear language education objectives including: (1) encourage and assist member states to improve the language skills of the citizens. Among them, foreign language ability is a key element in sharpening the competitive edge of talents. EU claims that by 2020, at least 50% of the 15-year-old adolescents could achieve the level of using the first foreign language independently (currently 42%), and at least 75% of the junior high school students could master at least two foreign languages (currently 61%). To this end, member states should speed up the reform to guide and train people to master the first and second foreign language, and strive to achieve the "mother tongue plus two" objective and (2) facilitate the transformation of education outcome and promote language practical application by means of increasing the practical work-based learning and training activities. Recommended measures include: (1) add more hours to foreign language teaching; (2) encourage schools to open foreign language classes at an earlier age; (3) take advantage of the open and public programs and funds to develop innovative teaching approaches; (4) develop more work-based learning schemes and offer more apprenticeship opportunities to students; (5) enhance the competence of the teaching staff with various on-the-job training programs; and (6) improve cooperation

between education and training institutions and employers.

Efforts by EU in Supporting the Member States to Advance Rethinking Education in Terms of Multi-linguistic Skill Building

Rethinking education paints a clear and beautiful picture for the improvement of the vocational and professional skills, in particular in language skills. It emphasizes the huge potential of the modern network technology and open educational resources in future foreign language learning and teaching, and highlights the importance of policy and financial support in the promotion of their closer cooperation. By referring to the European targets and benchmarks, member states may determine its directions and priorities in the field of foreign language teaching. Up to now, many member states, such as Britain, have agreed to accept and reflect on language education initiatives by the European Commission, including strengthening the quality of foreign language teaching, simplifying learning entry qualifications, improving opportunities for children receiving early foreign language education, etc. Rethinking Education project provides member states with a large number of language promoting programs and diverse funding programs. Erasmus+ is one of the important representatives of which the 2014–2020 program working focus is multi-language competence. Learners can obtain the language promotion opportunities according to the organization or institution he serves as well as the field of work, including: adult training opportunities, vocational training opportunities, overseas volunteering training, young people cooperation and community, network-based language support programs, etc. Through these programs, more than five million people so far have acquired learning, training, working, and foreign affairs service experience. ATHEME (Advancing the European Multilingual Experience) is another major multilingualism innovation and research project funded by Horizon 2020 program running from 2014 until 2020. So far the most influential and productive project in the field of language teaching and learning is ELL (European Language Label), which is presented annually to the most innovative language teaching and learning methods and projects by the groups or individuals from EU member states. Awarding criteria of the project include: (1) comprehensive and productive; (2) original and creative; (3) motivating and fulfilling; (4) European-tailored and oriented; and (5) applicable and transferable. From its establishment, around 2,400 projects and individuals have been labeled in the 28 EU participating countries. Next are the top 10 countries winning the highest number of labels both at team and individual level from 2006–2015 (see Table 1).

Table 1

Top 10 Label Winning Countries From 2006–2015

Rank	Country	Total number of labels
1	Italy	195
2	Poland	138
3	United Kingdom	95
4	Romania	79
5	Ireland	72
6	France	69
7	Belgium	63
8	Turkey	58
9	Austria	56
10	Czech Republic	56

From 2006, this project began to implement a priority plan on a two-year basis, which outlines the emphasis and guides the direction of next award. Here is a summary of Label Priorities over the past 10 years (see Table 2)

Table 2

Label Priorities on a Two-Year Basis

Time duration	Priorities for the label campaigns
2006–2007	(1) Initial and in-service language teacher training; (2) Diversification of the languages on offer.
2008–2009	(1) Intercultural dialogue; (2) Languages and business.
2010–2011	(1) Language learning in the community; (2) Language skills as a preparation for work.
2012–2013	(1) Language learning based on the new technologies; (2) Multilingual classrooms.
2014–2015	(1) Languages for social inclusion; (2) Languages and sport.

Reform and Innovations in the Evaluation System Across EU

In the majority of member countries, national tests are linked to the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). EU schools are currently working on to implement a progressive evaluation system, with which students' mid-term score amounts to 40 to 50 percent of the final grade. In recent years, computer-based language proficiency test is increasingly used in EU schools and institutes. With this mode, language skills are strictly classified and graded according to a multitude of indicators and variables. Students take the tests and have instant access to evaluation feedback and keep well-informed of personal progress after certain toil and effort. When taking a test, computers automatically select the test content and stuff according to the candidates' actual language level and ability. Each candidate gets his own test paper with unique and tailor-made content of language stuff. In particular, if a previous test item is too difficult for the candidate, then the second will automatically decline in difficulty, so that the difficulty level of the test questions remains as close as possible to the candidates' current proficiency level, which can effectively avoid the questions being too difficult or too easy as a whole and reach the purpose of testing each candidate's actual language level and ability. Computer-based proficiency test allows teachers to keep abreast of each student's academic progress, and adjust their teaching schedule, which is greatly conducive to the implementation of individualized instruction. With the strength of individuality, randomness, and timely feedback and other advantages, this model is replacing the traditional testing mode based on a unified paper and propositions.

Enlightenments for Domestic Foreign Language Education

(1) Build a more employment-oriented and targeted teaching and training system. Currently, the high investment and the low output of foreign language education incite wide social criticism. Apart from the imperfection of the teaching methods, the main reason is the poor profession targeting of foreign language education. Students' four-year university language study is mostly confined to the liberal contents. The five language skill building (listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating) are mostly held in the general communicative competence training, which are far different from specific professional and vocational language skills. In addition, as a national language skill evaluation baton, CET (College English Test) remains a general

and comprehensive foreign language proficiency testing system, of which the language materials and stuff are mostly based on the humanities and social sciences, and has a qualitative difference and diversity with vocational foreign language proficiency test in specific fields and contexts. It is not difficult to understand why some students pass these exams but are unable to cope with the general business negotiations, translate simple production and operation process, and even translate general merchandise ads and specifications. The underlying reason lies in a serious dislocation and decoupling between teaching and social and professional needs. Education institutions should tailor their courses to the job demands and conditions and encourage the relevant stakeholders, including businesses, employers, schools, and other sectors to get more involved in the teaching reform process.

Based on the above, the following concrete measures are imperative to be taken, including: develop and introduce a series of first-class vocational education programs to promote employment-oriented foreign language education and training; apply apprenticeship and dual-task learning models to facilitate the transition from learning to work; increase the number of foreign language courses and at the same time improve the quality of language teaching; adopt new measures to encourage teachers to participate in in-service training and degree programs; and encourage the adoption of new materials and innovative teaching methods such as CALL (content and language integrated teaching method: to teach a non-verbal discipline by medium of a foreign language).

(2) Promote innovative teaching and learning initiatives with more support and publicity. National quality funding and incentive programs in the field of foreign language teaching and learning fall short, and the dissemination of productive and fruitful innovations is far inadequate. The majority of the outstanding teaching projects and approaches in this area are only confined either to one's own campus, or the annual national college English teaching and research conference or by the training sessions and conferences held by foreign language book presses, such as FLTRP (Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press), SFLEP (Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press), etc., of which the teacher exchange opportunities and audience are rather limited and rare, and are not fully accessible to the majority of foreign language teachers. National-level advocacy of teaching and training methods and practice with a wide range demonstration effect are keenly desired.

(3) Reform and optimize the evaluation mechanism and framework to guide foreign language learning onto the path of lifelong learning. At present, foreign language teaching evaluation in China is generally based on standardized tests usually held towards the end of a semester, which belongs to ex-post evaluation. A perspective of the European policies, methods, and evaluation mode concerning foreign language education can offer some insights into the current foreign language education reform in China, and narrow the gap with developed countries. At least three improvements in evaluation methods are to be desired and anticipated, namely, from the ex-post evaluation to the mid-process evaluation, from closed-end school evaluation to the public and social evaluation, from standardized paper-based evaluation to the computer-based adaptive randomization evaluation. In the meanwhile, education and training institutions should join their efforts to improve the reliability and validity of the evaluation system to ensure it provides employers with solid and convincing reference of language skills in talent selection. Currently, the reference value of the National CET results for the employers are generally unsatisfactory and still much to be desired, other authoritative and reliable social foreign language proficiency evaluation mechanisms are yet to be established and further improved.

(4) Promote cooperation between education institutions and enterprises to ensure the provision of right curriculum and skills needed for the market. Language learning must be targeted at employment capabilities,

talent flow, and economic growth. Schools should invite the employers to introduce the importance of language skills to their job to students, make them aware that foreign language skills could bring competitive edge for their future employment and promotion, naturally creating a strong intrinsic motivation and condition for an active mastery of one to two foreign languages, hence better appreciate the opportunity of language learning at school and willing to devote more efforts and energy to learn the language well. Enterprises and employers should report in feedback to schools the strength and weakness of employees in terms of the foreign language use in working practice, then schools and institutions will make timely adjustments to the teaching plans and programs to make them better serve the professional and vocational needs.

Conclusion

The road to success is not always with flowers, there are still thorns and twists. Rethinking Program is currently confronting a great challenge facing the Brexit from EU (Britain, a founding member and great contributor of this project, exits from EU). Whether Britain can continue to enjoy the vast preferences and resources of EU programs (e.g., their applications to the educational funds and awards) is becoming a question. And what is the legacy of this project in UK. All of these are waiting for further observation and discussion. Among all of these, one thing is for sure, EU will unswervingly hold the multilingualism banner and carry on their drive to the 2020 strategic goal.

References

- 7-year European language label—Innovative projects in the lifelong learning programme.* (2014). Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- European Commission. (2012). *Language competences for employability, mobility and growth accompanying the document communication from the commission. Rethinking education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes* (SWD(2012) 372 final). Strasbourg: Commission Staff Working Document.
- European Commission. (2012). *Rethinking education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes* (COM(2012) 669 final). Brussels: The European Commission.
- Study on foreign language proficiency and employability executive summary resumé.* (2015). Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.