

Managing languages in academia

Pointers from education economics and language economics

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Languages in academia: an increasingly important issue

- Barely 10 years ago, a generally overlooked question in conferences – and only partly formulated in university governance
- Since 2000, a theme addressed with increasing frequency (often in connection with “internationalisation”, “globalisation”, “mobility”)
- Yet sharply diverging concerns – for ex.:
 - March 2009, Geneva: DLF
 - November 2009, Berne: SAGW-ASSH
 - December 2009, Brussels: ACA



Generally *under-identified* set of issues

- Frequent emphasis on pedagogical questions...
- ... with associated organisational implications
- General oversight of the social, political and economic implications
- ... thus hampering universities' (and societies') capacity to make well-founded choices.



Our “menu”

1. Reframing the issue in policy analysis perspective
2. Key instruments for evaluating options
3. Pre-identification of the range of issues (towards a typology?)
4. Application to selected questions: (i) language(s) of teaching; (ii) language(s) of research
5. Conclusion



Three usual approaches

- There is a considerable literature on university governance in economic perspective... but it typically ignores language questions.
- There is a growing literature on linguistic practices in universities... but it typically examines them in the perspective of (i) pedagogy/education sciences *OR* (ii) applied linguistics (e.g., conversation analysis), ignoring governance aspects.
- Literature addressing the linguistic aspects of university governance typically focuses on a specific issue (e.g. “internationalisation”), and misses the broader political, social and economic dimensions.



Why are the “usual” approaches not enough?

- They may tell us *how* to do certain things (e.g., how to teach *more efficiently* in language *X* or *Y*)...
- ... but they do not tell us *what* to do and *for what reasons* (e.g., *should* we be teaching through *X* or *Y* at all?)
- Even detailed and insightful description of practices does not *per se* provide a guide to action.
- Need for an *policy analysis* perspective, which is not essentially prescriptive, but analytical:
 - it identifies the choices at hand
 - It spells out their implications
 - It provides a basis for informed decision-making



In practice:

- Existing policy documents suggest that universities (or their state-level authorities) routinely make major language-related decisions with only strikingly *incomplete identification* of the issues at hand...
- ... revealing a surprising difficulty to think “out of the box” (FA&RW: “folk linguistics”; JP: “extraordinarily stubborn beliefs”)...
- Still unmet need to realise that:
 - Linguistic practices *reflect* broader sociolinguistic conditions
 - Through their linguistic practices, they *shape* these broader conditions
 - Universities’ language choices are *per se* elements of language policy deserving of proper evaluation.



Key concepts 1 – The counterfactual

- The course of action chosen must be demonstrably better than the alternative(s) in terms of clearly formulated and properly measured criteria.
- The alternatives must be spelled out – it is not necessarily the *statu quo ante*, but what is likely to happen if the course of action considered is *not* followed.
- The full consequences of at least two options (the policy considered and the presumably “best” alternative) must be computed and compared.
- *Nothing* is good in the absolute, but only by comparison with explicit alternatives.



Key concepts 2 – Meta-criteria: efficiency and fairness

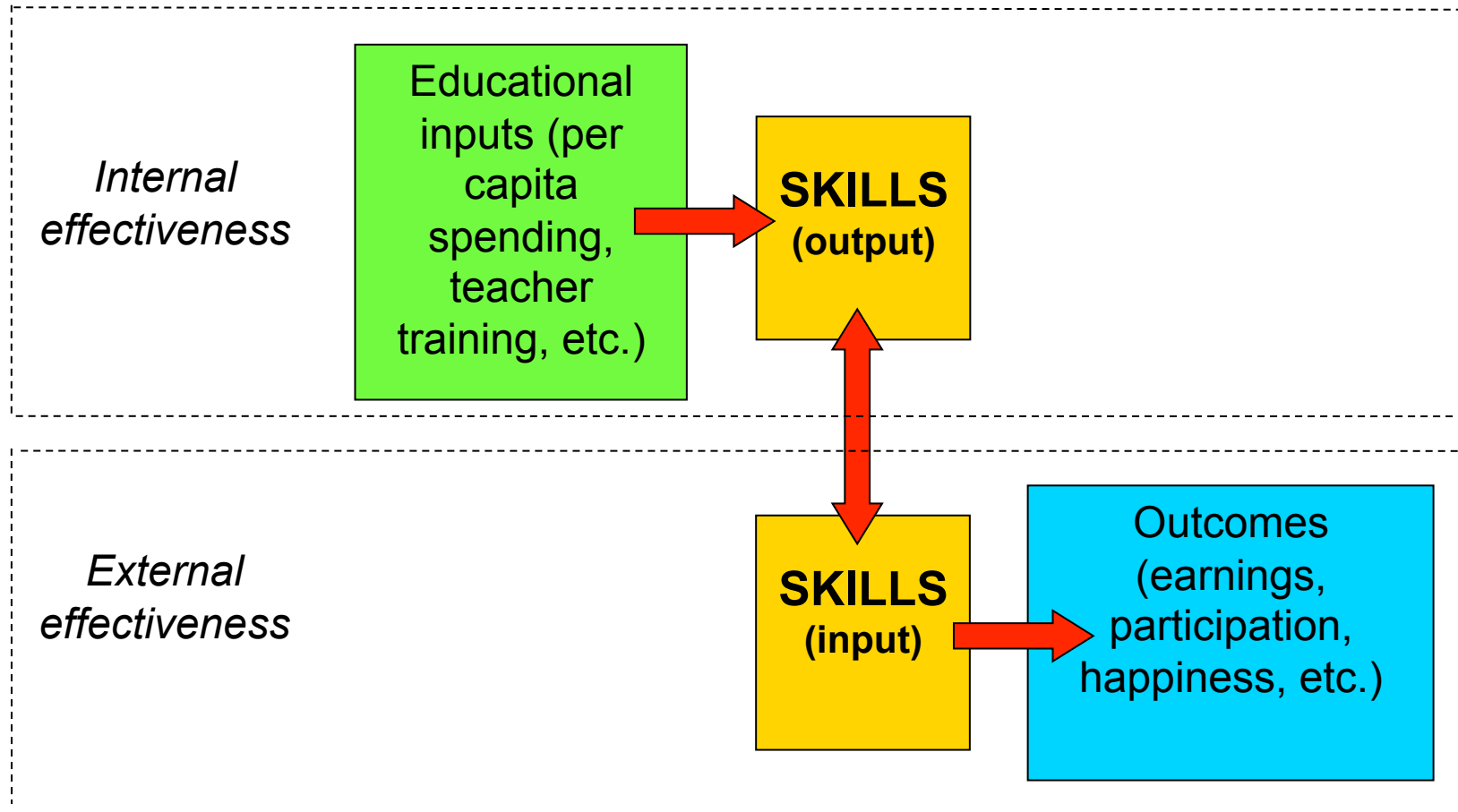
- Efficiency: proper allocation of scarce resources (akin to cost-effectiveness, e.g. “avoiding waste”)
- Fairness: ensuring that the resulting distribution of resources between actors (or groups of actors) meets some underlying criterion of equity (normally “imported” from normative political theory)



Key concepts 3 – Relevant resources

- Policy evaluation must cast the net wide and include not only material, financial, tangible resources...
- ... but also non-material, symbolic, “psychic” resources...
- ... if only because the non-material, intangible consequences usually have very tangible implications.
- Therefore, any approach that omits dimensions such as “disenfranchisement”, “linguistic insecurity”, etc. is incomplete.

Key concepts 4 – Internal v. external levels





Language in universities: towards a typology

■ Five types/groups of activities:

- Languages taught as subjects
- Language(s) of instruction
- Language(s) used in research (carrying out of research activities proper *and* publication for different audiences)
- Language(s) of administration
- Language(s) of external communication

■ Three tiers/levels of action:

- General policy orientations (G)
- Organisational questions (O)
- Pedagogical questions (P)

Overview of linguistic practices (*examples*)

SUBJECTS	INSTRUCTION	RESEARCH	ADMINISTRATION	EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION
<p>G: What languages, up to what level, for whom – and for what reasons?</p> <p>O: What budget implications?</p> <p>P: How best to impart the skills aimed at?</p>	<p>G: Should FLs (=“LOTLOs”) be used? In which programmes or courses? Why?</p> <p>O: What need for associated services for teaching staff (e.g. language centre)?</p> <p>P: What impact on ways of teaching?</p>	<p>G: should FLs / LWCs be used? For which research activities? Why?</p> <p>O: What need for associated services for teaching & research staff?</p> <p>P: implications for training of PhD students</p>	<p>G: Any reason to use FLs in admin?</p> <p>O: what implications for internal by-laws? What need for support for admin staff?</p> <p>P: specific issues concerning admin staff.</p>	<p>G: Institutional image aimed at; targeted student profile and recruitment;</p> <p>P: setting up of language quality assurance</p> <p>O: specific issues concerning int’l affairs officers</p>



Implications for governance

- Very wide range of issues
- Lack of knowledge and resources to address them
- Not a reason to ignore them completely
- At least some effort should be made to identify these issues and spell out the corresponding implications of language choices.



Role of English in university teaching and research

- Wide-spread increase in the use of English in teaching and research (*NOTE*: English itself not the issue – the issue is that of the implications of linguistic hegemony)
- Choices made on the basis of general, sometimes implicit assumptions:
 - Necessary to attract the “best” students
 - Others do it so we must do it too
 - English is “the language of science”



Assessing the assumptions - Teaching

- Are foreign students always better than local ones?
- Will the best non-A φ students pick English-language tuition in *non*-English speaking countries?
- What's the distribution of their skills levels in English?
- To what extent does “internationalisation” *reflect* or *express* quality?
- What are the associated material and symbolic costs?



Assessing the assumptions – Research [1]

- Is research really produced in/through one (dominant) language only? (Lévy-Leblond, 1996)

	INFORMAL	INSTITUTIONAL	PUBLIC
WRITTEN	Laboratory log books, correspondence	Scholarly papers and books	Publications for non- specialists
ORAL	Team meetings	Colloquia, seminars, specialist conferences	Media presentations



Assessing the assumptions – Research [2]

- How do linguistic practices affect creativity, problem-solving abilities, and innovation? Is knowledge creation and sharing “language free” or “language bound”?
- What are the macro-level effects of domain loss if a language is marginalised or even excluded from scientific endeavour?
- Even *if* the allocative effects of adopting one language for research are shown to be positive, what are the distributive implications?
- Do the dominant “ranking” systems (for universities, countries, etc.) based on journal publications introduce biases?



Conclusion

- Many important decisions are made without any serious attempt to assess their consequences
- The *net* effects of convergence towards the use of one language in teaching and research are not necessarily positive
- Choices seem to be governed by hasty assumptions
- A glimmer of hope? The private sector seems more aware of the relevance of multilingualism



Danke – Merci !

