

Schools, Swinglish and the language debate

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The rise of English has provoked one of the most intense political debates in recent Swiss history: the question of which foreign language children should learn first at school. Traditionally, children in German-speaking Switzerland learned French as their first foreign language, while children in French-speaking Switzerland learned German. This arrangement was meant to strengthen the cohesion of the country. In the late 1990s, the Canton of Zurich decided to introduce English as the first foreign language in primary school, with French to follow later. The decision, taken by the cantonal education authorities around 1998 to 2000, triggered protests in the French-speaking cantons, which saw it as a threat to national cohesion.¹

The Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education responded in 2004 with a compromise strategy. Children should learn two foreign languages in primary school, one of them a national language, with the first starting at the latest in the third year and the second at the latest in the fifth year. Each canton could decide which language came first. The cantons of central and eastern German-speaking Switzerland chose English first, while the cantons along the language border, including Basel-Stadt and Basel-Landschaft, chose French first. Basel joined the Passepartout project with Bern, Solothurn, Fribourg and Valais, which developed new teaching materials for French from the third year and English from the fifth year.²

The debate has continued. Popular initiatives in several cantons sought to reduce primary school teaching to one foreign language, which would in practice have meant English. Some cantonal parliaments have voted to postpone French to secondary school, which prompted the Federal Council to consider intervening on the basis of the Languages Act. The Passepartout teaching materials were criticised by teachers and parents, and Basel-Landschaft withdrew from parts of the project. The dispute

shows how deeply the question of English touches the self-understanding of a multilingual country.³

The English spoken in Switzerland has its own features. Linguists have described Swiss English, sometimes called "Singlish", as a variety marked by loanwords and calques from German and French, such as the use of "handy" for a mobile phone or of "to be in the mood for" in unusual contexts. Swiss advertising and corporate communication use English words and slogans freely. Swiss German, too, has absorbed English vocabulary in many domains, from information technology to youth culture. In Basel, the presence of native English speakers in the international organisations and the pharmaceutical groups provides a counterweight, so that the English used in the companies tends toward an international standard.⁴

1 Notes

1. On the Zurich decision to introduce English as the first foreign language in primary school, associated with the cantonal director of education Ernst Buschor, see the contemporary debate in the Swiss press and the literature on Swiss language policy. Dates to be verified. ↩
2. Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK), strategy on language teaching of 25 March 2004, and the HarmoS Concordat of 14 June 2007. On the Passepartout project, see the information of the participating cantons. To be verified. ↩
3. On popular initiatives on early language teaching, for example in the cantons of Zurich, Lucerne and Thurgau, and on the debate in Basel-Landschaft about the Passepartout materials, see the cantonal records and press reports. Status to be verified. ↩
4. On English loanwords and pseudo-anglicisms in Swiss German and Swiss English, see the contributions in Watts and Murray (eds.), *Die fünfte Landessprache?*, 2001, and the research of Swiss linguists on English in Swiss advertising. To be verified. ↩

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