Does English have a rightful place in our university lecture theatres? Only for foreigners, says the law of 1994, or if the subject is of an “international nature”. Yet science is international by definition, not by exception. Can the law prevent scholars and teachers from using the international languages of science, beginning with English? An INED survey puts the debate in perspective by exploring the use of languages by discipline and by generation.

Should French universities be allowed to teach in English? This question, first raised in 1994 when the “Toubon Act” was debated in parliament, has raised its head again with a new higher education and research bill that includes a provision to authorize English-language classes in certain international programmes (Box 1). Presented on 20 March 2013 to the Council of Ministers, it received a hostile response from the Académie française, which the next day demanded its withdrawal on the grounds that it “fosters the marginalization of our language”. [1] For the President of the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), along with several Nobel prize winners and Fields medallists, on the other hand, it is the rejection of English that threatens to marginalize French research and do harm to the country. [2]

Science, international by exception?

To reassure the research community, the Toubon Act included several exceptions to the rule of French-only teaching: foreign students, foreign teachers, or “teaching of an international nature”. Yet science is international by definition, not by exception. Depending on the intended audience, its vehicle may be English, the national language or the languages of the cultures under study. Since teaching is anchored in research, it makes sense to use the same languages for both. Over the last twenty years, calls for projects, scientific journals, assessment committees, academic recruitment and student mobility have all become increasingly internationalized, so this broad interpretation of the law is in phase with ongoing trends. Some 18% of Master’s students, and 41% of PhD students in France are foreigners. [3] Yet the idea of granting an “exemption” for classes on international programmes implies a return to a more restrictive interpretation of the law. Indeed, far from extending the universities’ freedom of initiative, it may have the quite opposite effect.

The ELVIRE survey on the use of modern languages in French public research sheds new light on the debate. It was conducted by INED between 2007 and 2009 on a sample of 1,963 research laboratory directors and 8,883 researchers, with support from the Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France (DGLFLF). It explores the use of French, English and other languages in all types of research activity, including teaching, and provides an overview of the situation in France, 18 years after the Toubon Act came into force.

Marginalization of French in the hard sciences

When asked to rank the languages used internationally in their field (for all types of activity), the laboratory directors provided clear-cut answers: for 83%, English is the most widely used language in their own field, and is

* National Institute for Demographic Studies (INED).
In the so-called “hard” and reputedly “exact” sciences, the strongest demand for more language lessons and practice is from 59% of the researchers (all disciplines, all levels of seniority) who feel that their grasp of English is imperfect, but 77% consider that “its use has become so widespread in research that the choice of language is a foregone conclusion”. A full 90% of researchers born in the 1980s agree with this statement, and it is this age group that expresses the expectation being that foreign colleagues will give precedence to French in these same subject areas. Fewer young multilingual researchers

All other things being equal, a researcher’s grade, length of tenure, social origin and mother tongue have little influence on the choice of foreign language used in scientific activities. Sex has no effect. The two determining factors are age and, above all, scientific discipline. From the oldest to the youngest, there is a doubling of the proportion of researchers who report practices and attitudes that are favourable to English: using English rather than French, Spanish or Italian as working language (Figure 3); recognizing that publishing in French reduces the chances of becoming known or of getting promotion; accepting assessment in English, but also considering that English can be promoted while still defending the French language (figure 3). But the choice of language depends even more strongly on the scientific discipline. In life sciences and engineering, English holds a monopoly position which unifies the scientific field by promoting international exchanges.
Psychology and economics are also attracted by this model. By contrast, the humanities, attached to cultural and intellectual diversity, are still resolutely multilingual. Astronomy and mathematics lie at the half-way point, followed by the social sciences, where English is now dominant but does not yet hold a monopoly.

**A quarter of teachers give classes in English**

All languages combined, 95% of French academics gave “regular classes or seminars” to students in higher education in 2007-2008. Of this number, 9% reported giving “regular” classes in English, and 17% “occasional” classes, making a total of 26%. Junior and senior researchers teach classes half as often as university academics, but twice as many do so in English: 55% teach at a university, of whom 13% “regularly” in English and 34% “occasionally”, making a total of 47%. Proportions are around the average in the hard sciences, already equipped with a formalized language, but higher in the political sciences (15% + 22%) and in management (10% + 23%). In fact, the catalogue of courses in English drawn up by the Campus France agency gets thicker every year.

**A lesser propensity to blame the American empire**

These findings point to three conclusions. First, it is futile to denounce the hegemony of English in technological disciplines, life sciences and formalized subjects such as economics or mathematics. A coercive policy obliging them to adopt the humanities model would be doomed to failure. Second, English will never be dislodged by an Anglophobic defence of French. Far fewer researchers now point the finger at Anglo-Saxon imperialism: while 67% of those born before 1955 still consider that “giving priority to English in science contributes to the domination of Anglo-American culture”, the proportion is just 40% among those born in the 1980s (Figure 4). The idea that “French must be defended” as the language of research is similarly in decline: 67% among the oldest age group, 38% among the youngest. However, there is broad agreement with the idea that “French should be preferred for a national audience, and English for international exchanges” (70% among the oldest and 90% among the youngest).
No English please!

Box 1. The Toubon Act of 1994 and its draft amendment

Under article L. 121-3 of the Education Code, which uses the terms of the Toubon Act of 4 August 1994:

I. The command of the French language and a knowledge of two other languages are among the fundamental objectives of teaching.

II. The language used for teaching and examinations, and for theses and dissertations in public and private teaching establishments is French, except when the use of another language is justified by the teaching requirements of regional or foreign languages and cultures, or when the teachers are foreigners in guest or associate teaching positions. Foreign schools, or schools opened specifically for foreign students, and establishments offering international courses are not bound by this obligation.

Under the policy bill for higher education and research presented by Mme Fioraso to the Council of Ministers of 20 March 2013, it is suggested that the following provision be added before the above paragraph: “Exceptions may also be justified by the nature of certain teaching courses, such as those dispensed under a partnership with a foreign or international institution, as provided for in article L. 123-7, or as part of a European programme.”

Box 2. The Toubon Act, protecting consumers and employees

According to the annual report of the Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France, the government body responsible for policing the use of French, some 120 complaints are filed each year under the Toubon Act, of which around thirty (a figure provided by the French consumer protection authority) lead to a conviction. But they all concern problems of product labelling or services provided in a foreign language, for which the Toubon Act strengthened the controls introduced in 1975 under the Bas-Auriol Act. None of these convictions concerned scientific research activities. However, officials of the French Ministry of Higher Education have, on occasion, cited the Act as grounds for refusing to certify a teaching programme or a qualification. The judgement against the National Institute for Health and Medical Research (INSERM) pronounced in June 2008 by the administrative tribunal of Paris does not contradict this observation. The director had announced that the scientific council – whose members include foreign experts – would audition its management teams in English as part of the renewal process. Alerted by employees who wanted to follow the debate, the trades unions lodged a successful complaint. It was not the use of English in research (teaching, publications, theses, lectures, websites, etc.) that was deemed unlawful by the courts, but its use without translation in the management of research personnel, contrary to the requirements of the Labour Code that were strengthened by the Toubon Act.

References


Abstract

A survey of public-sector researchers and academics shows that English is used almost exclusively as the international language of dialogue in the hard sciences, and is also well-established in the humanities and social sciences. English is also the language of choice for publications, meetings held in France and websites. A quarter of the surveyed researchers and academics had taught a class in English during the year. The Toubon Act of 1994 protects consumers and employees, but has not held back the expansion of English as the international language of communication in science.