

# Mais non! French universities may teach in English

May 22 2013, by Jamey Keaten

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In France, there's a brewing debate over whether to speak anglais in universite. The National Assembly on Wednesday was taking up an education reform bill that would allow public universities to hold some courses—like science or economics classes—in English, a plan that has alarmed language purists and the political far-right alike.

President Francois Hollande's Socialist-led government is pushing the idea to better prepare French students for the global job market and lure more foreign brains. But France's complex history with Britain means perceived incursions of the language of Shakespeare often go down badly.

French law requires classes to be conducted in French, though a 1994 revision allows some non-Francophone foreign students and teachers to hold some classes in English. But Higher Education Minister Genevieve Fioraso says some schools, including the super-elite "Grandes Ecoles," are flaunting the law by holding hundreds of courses in English.

She says her "good sense" reform would expand access to English instruction for less well-off students, and help French schools catch up with other European universities where English already is broadly used—like in Sweden or Germany—and which are competing for minds from developing nations like China, India and Brazil.

Former President [Nicolas Sarkozy](#) took English lessons while in office but struggled to speak it publicly. Hollande was pilloried on [Twitter](#) in

November after signing his congratulations letter to re-elected President [Barack Obama](#), "Friendly, Francois Hollande"—a direct, and clumsy, translation of "amicalement"—an oft-used epistolary term in French.

The reform is in a broader higher education bill to be discussed in the Assembly, parliament's lower house, over three days before a vote next week. It is part of efforts by the unpopular Hollande to reform a moribund economy, keep France competitive and ultimately create jobs, his No. 1 priority.

In a TV interview Tuesday, Fioraso, a former English teacher, said many students from the developing world do not come to France because of the "obstacle" of the French language and that luring them will help France "acculturate them to our values and culture" and avoid becoming too insular.

Michelle Lauton, of the SNESUP professors' union, said France's first order of business should be ensuring high-quality English instruction.

"The French speak living languages badly—notably English," she said during a protest march toward the Assembly on Wednesday. "First we need to improve the level of English for those students who learn it already, rather than teach it poorly more broadly."

The Academie Francaise, the centuries-old guardian of the French language that has railed against incursions of terms like e-mail and weekend, says the proposal would "degrade" the use of French in higher learning.

Bernard Pivot, a beloved former host of literary and cultural TV talk shows, noted in a recent newspaper interview that French had its own heyday as the lingua franca for much of Europe during the era of King Louis XIV—more than 400 years ago. French was also long considered

the language of diplomacy, and its impact on English is vast. Now, he argued, the very survival of French is at stake if English gets authorized access to French academia.

"If we let English into our universities, if we let it, alone, dictate science and the modern world, then French will be mutilated and weakened," he told Christian daily La Croix. "It will become a banal language, or worse, a dead language."

Fioraso has called the hubbub "much ado about nothing." Her ministry says that less than 1 percent of all total university classes will be in English; only "technical" fields like science, math, and business will be affected; and foreign students will still take French.

Others were having fun with the issue.

"Teaching in English: Let's Do It," left-leaning daily Liberation wrote sassily in an English-only front page edition Tuesday. Inside, an editorial said, "Let's stop behaving like the last members of a besieged Gallic village."

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