

Waldemar Martyniuk

## **Dealing with challenges in European language education – the contribution of the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz**

### **Abstract**

The Council of Europe aims at maintaining and enhancing linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe and promoting learning and use of languages as a means to support intercultural dialogue, social cohesion and democratic citizenship, and as an important economic asset in a modern knowledge-based society. The Council of Europe's efforts in this respect are well illustrated by the development of such reference documents and tools as the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe 2001) and the *European Language Portfolio* (ELP), conventions such as the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*, and policy documents such as the *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue “Living together as equals in dignity”* (Council of Europe 2008a), the *Guide for the development of language education policies in Europe* (Council of Europe 2007), the *Recommendation (2008)7 on The use of the Council of Europe's “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages” (CEFR) and the promotion of plurilingualism* (Council of Europe 2008b) and the most recent *Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education* (Council of Europe 2010).

In this context, the European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe (ECML), based in Graz, Austria, is launching its fourth medium-term programme of activities (2012-2015). The programme offers a coherent concept of inclusive, plurilingual and intercultural education and reflects both the mission of the Centre and the current concerns of its member states and partners in the area of language education. It is based on a long-term vision aiming at developing inclusive, plurilingual and intercultural pedagogic approaches reaching beyond the foreign language classroom and encompassing all linguistic abilities and needs of all groups of learners in a lifelong-learning process (in-school and out-of-school).

### **1. Introduction: the ECML**

The European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML), a Council of Europe Partial Agreement based in Graz, Austria, has been serving the community of language education professionals in its 34 member states for over 17 years now. The ECML was set up in 1994, as an Enlarged Partial Agreement of the Council of Europe.<sup>1</sup> The Austrian authorities fund the infrastructure of the Centre and put at its disposal modern premises in Graz where the Secretariat is based and where the great majority of ECML events are held.

This unique intergovernmental centre – integrated within the Council of Europe's Department of Education in the Directorate of Democratic Citizenship and Participation offers concrete approaches to dealing with issues and challenges facing Europe's increasingly multilingual and multicultural societies. The ECML seeks to make a positive difference to language education in Europe by supporting the implementation of Council of Europe language education policies through:

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<sup>1</sup> A Partial Agreement is an administrative framework of the Council of Europe. Currently, 31 of the Council's 47 member states have subscribed to the Agreement on the ECML.

- advancing the quality of teaching and learning languages;
- promoting innovative approaches;
- fostering dialogue between language education researchers, practitioners and decision makers.

Through its medium-term programmes consisting of projects, workshops and conferences to which participants from the member states are invited, the ECML provides a platform for cooperation with experts, associations and institutions involved in enhancing European standards in language education. It also maintains Europe-wide networks for teacher trainers, researchers and educational administrators.

The hallmark of the ECML is the organisation of international language education projects. Coordinated by teams of experts, these projects primarily target multipliers in language education such as teacher trainers, textbook authors and experts in the area of the development of curricula, educational standards, evaluation/assessment and certification. The Centre has successfully completed three large-scale medium-term programmes of activities comprising more than 70 projects coordinated by international teams of experts and directly involving over ten thousand language professionals in Europe and beyond, with the impact reaching as afield as Canada and Japan. The Centre's second medium-term programme (2004-2007) grouped 22 projects under the title *Languages for social cohesion – language education in a multilingual and multicultural Europe*. The projects covered a wide range of themes under four general headings:

- Coping with linguistic and social diversity,
- Communication in a multicultural society,
- Professional development and reference tools,
- Innovative approaches and new technologies.<sup>2</sup>

The Centre's third medium-term programme (2008-2011) entitled *Empowering language professionals: Competences – Networks – Impact – Quality* encompassed 23 different projects and addressed the following four thematic areas:

- A. Evaluation and assessment,
- B. Continuity in language learning,
- C. Content and language integrated education,
- D. Plurilingual education.<sup>3</sup>

The third medium-term programme of the ECML came to a conclusion in September 2011 with a large-scale international conference in Graz. The results of the conference – as well as all publications, reports and CD-ROMs resulting from the ECML's activities – are available on the ECML website: [www.ecml.at](http://www.ecml.at).

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on the projects of the second medium-term programme see: [www.ecml.at/socialcohesion](http://www.ecml.at/socialcohesion).

<sup>3</sup> For more information on these ECML projects me see: [www.ecml.at/empowerment](http://www.ecml.at/empowerment).

## 2. Quality Education for plurilingual people living in multilingual societies: The Graz Declaration on Language Education 2010

On 7 January 2010, an INGO-Professional Network Forum on language education was founded at the Graz Centre. Through this Forum the ECML seeks to further intensify its links with professional bodies working in language education and to create synergies between organisations with similar aims. The first ever meeting of its kind brought together eight renowned international associations working in this area, all of which had signed bilateral cooperation agreements with the ECML.<sup>4</sup> Representatives of the Language Policy Unit of the Council of Europe, the Multilingualism Policy Unit of the European Commission, and the Canadian institutional ECML partner, the Official Languages and Bilingualism Institute of the University of Ottawa (OLBI), also participated in the meeting. Henry Widdowson (Vienna University) provided comments from the perspective of an independent expert in the field. The one-day event enabled the Forum partners to gain a better understanding of the working context and the respective competences of the associations, all of which deal with different aspects of policy, research and practice in language education. The meeting also enabled them to identify and become more aware of the shared concerns and overlapping expertise within the Professional Network Forum.

After lively discussions the Forum members identified the key challenges facing language education today and adopted the Graz Declaration on Language Education 2010 entitled *Quality Education for plurilingual people living in multilingual societies*.<sup>5</sup>

The members of the Forum agreed that growing linguistic and cultural diversity in modern European societies should not be viewed as an obstacle or a ‘problem’, but rather as an asset and a potential benefit to society. Underlining the right of all learners to an unrestricted and fair lifelong access to good quality education they pointed at the importance of language competences that provide the necessary basis for such access. All Forum participants were in agreement that the provision of support in developing adequate language abilities should take into account, make use of, and build further on the learner's existing language competences by including the learners’ “own” languages, especially if they are minority or migrant languages, as they are important features in their successful integration into the world of learning and help them in becoming self-confident and responsible members of society. At the same time, the learner should seek and be offered sufficient support to develop the skills required for his or her educational career in a given context. Members of the network stressed the fact that learners with low socio-economic status, special needs, and those whose linguistic or cultural background may disadvantage them in the educational system require special attention and support for the devel-

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<sup>4</sup> The European Association for Quality Language Services (EAQUALS), the World Federation of Modern Language Associations (FIPLV), the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE), the International Association of Applied Linguistics (AILA), the International Certificate Conference (ICC), the European Confederation of Language Centres in Higher Education (CercleS), the European Association for Language Testing in Europe (EALTA) and the CEL/ELC, Conseil européen pour les langues/European Language Council.

<sup>5</sup> For the full text of the Declaration and more information on the Forum go to: [www.ecml.at/aboutus/aboutus.asp?t=pronetfor](http://www.ecml.at/aboutus/aboutus.asp?t=pronetfor).

opment of the language abilities necessary for their educational success. In conclusion, the Forum participants called for a modification in approach, moving from the teaching and learning of languages as separate, unrelated and thus isolated (school) subjects towards providing coherent support for the lifelong development of transversal, individual strategies for deploying available linguistic resources purposefully, thus making efficient use of one's own range of language competences.

The findings and proposals of the Graz Forum were adopted as a rationale for the 4<sup>th</sup> medium-term programme of the ECML activities (2012-15) entitled *Learning through languages: promoting inclusive, plurilingual and intercultural education*.

### **3. The 4<sup>th</sup> medium-term programme of ECML activities 2012-2015**

Within its new programme launched in October 2011 the Centre intends to initiate European cooperation on the implementation of the new concept of plurilingual and intercultural education proposed by international expert groups whose work was coordinated by the Language Policy Unit and adopted by the member states of the Council of Europe. The proposals for the programme seek to draw attention to the fact that access for all learners to good quality education is a precondition for democratic developments in European societies. The learner and the right of all learners to quality education at all levels constitute the focal point of the reference model established for the programme resulting from several consultation rounds with and adopted by the 34 states-members of the ECML Partial Agreement in October 2010. The end-user and ultimate beneficiary of all activities is the learner whereas projects included in the programme target education and language professionals and stakeholders in society functioning as facilitators of the learning process.

The ECML's long-term vision on language education is building upon the philosophy of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) emphasising that human beings do “not keep [...] languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather build [...] up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact” (Council of Europe 2001, 4). The new perspective expands from a comparatively narrow focus on foreign language learning to learning in all educational contexts and domains always incorporating language learning in the mother tongue of the learner and/or in any other language of the learner's repertoire.

#### **3.1 The overarching aim: promoting inclusive, plurilingual and intercultural education**

The growing linguistic and cultural diversity in today's European societies makes it evident that in order to cater adequately for each learner's needs – supporting the development of each learner's linguistic and intercultural capacities required for his/her personal well-being and success and for the benefit of the society they are a part of – provision needs to build on inclusive, plurilingual and intercultural pedagogic approaches. Pedagogic approaches are what teachers, educational institutions and society as a whole must

provide and apply in implementing education. Consequently, pedagogical approaches following inclusive, plurilingual and intercultural thinking are practical steps to undertake in order to achieve good quality education for all.

### 3.1.1 Inclusive education

Inclusive education evolved from Special Needs Education and its philosophy to counteract exclusion and discrimination of children with disabilities. In a broader context, this discussion was brought forward under the label “integration” targeting other disadvantaged learner groups like migrants, cultural and linguistic minorities, children or adults of low economic or social status, etc. The discussions about necessary reform and change of education in order to achieve quality education for all have made clear that the challenge of diversity cannot be met by integration efforts on the side of the marginalised group only. Rather, all have to pursue and work towards the common goal of taking a holistic approach ensuring equal opportunities and rights for all. In this context, inclusive approaches are being promoted as a way to provide learning environments that allow for democratic, effective and sustainable learning processes, outcomes and output for the benefit of all. Following this ideal, the ECML programme intends to further elaborate the obvious link between linguistic and intercultural competences and inclusion to identify approaches for practical implementation in classroom. Strengthening links with the community is also vital: relationships between teachers, students, parents and society at large are crucial for developing inclusive learning environments.

### 3.1.2 Plurilingual education

Plurilingual education and resulting pedagogic approaches aim at respecting and developing each learner's language repertoire enabling the speaker to use languages with different degrees of proficiency and adapted to different contexts (home, school, public, private, professional, etc.). The concept of plurilingualism was first elaborated in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe 2001). It was pointed out that the implementation of plurilingual education would have a profound impact on language education by moving away from the ideal of “mastering” a foreign language to the perspective of developing the learner's unique individual linguistic abilities and competences. In the context of the discussion on quality education for all it is the social aspect of plurilingual education that has been stressed. Awareness-raising activities targeting languages present in classrooms but usually not considered as learning objects are being considered as powerful means to develop peer learning built on tolerance, respect for and knowledge about each other. In view of this dimension, plurilingual education ideally complements the inclusive and intercultural components of the envisaged pedagogic approaches.

### 3.1.3 Intercultural education

The need for European citizens to develop intercultural competences has been widely acknowledged by educational authorities and teaching professionals. In the Council of Europe's *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* (Council of Europe 2008a) it is pointed

out that attitudes, behaviour, knowledge and skills relevant in intercultural contexts are not acquired as a side-effect of developing language competences but need to be explicitly placed on the educational agenda in order to be taught, learnt, practised, elaborated and adapted to individual needs and social contexts. There is a clear link between intercultural education and language (specifically foreign language) education. But in view of the role of intercultural dialogue in the context of democratic citizenship and human rights education it became clear that intercultural education needs to become a constituent part of formal education and a nurtured element of the informal/non-formal learning context in good quality education in Europe.

## 3.2 Targeted areas

### 3.2.1 Foreign language classroom

The ECML has developed significant expertise in the domains of foreign language learning and teaching. It is intended to make use of the expertise and resources developed within the ECML and the other related units at the Council of Europe work as well as to build on developments and results of other relevant organisations and institutions, in particular of the European Commission.

### 3.2.2 Majority language classroom

In recent years special attention has been paid to the context of teaching and learning of languages taught as subjects in their own right, for example, Polish in Poland, Swedish in Sweden, German in the schools of the German minority in Denmark, etc. Discussions focused on questions like how to ensure the development of relevant language competences of students coming from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds or whether the traditional monolingual approach to teaching the majority language would still be appropriate in this situation. In continuation with initial projects carried out in this domain, the ECML intends to further contribute to quality developments for the benefit of all learners in majority language classrooms.

The notion of *majority languages* may raise concerns and is subject for intensive discussions as the terminology is emerging and continues to be refined further. In other publications, the term *majority language* covers such notions as first language, mother tongue, national language, official language, state language, the/main language of schooling, etc. The ECML seeks to highlight the high-stake role this language has beyond schooling in society. With this perspective, the ECML is addressing the needs of learners in classrooms where these languages are taught as school subjects in their own right.

### 3.2.3 Classroom for other languages

In addition to foreign and majority languages the ECML is catering for other languages available in a school context as resources for communication and learning. Classes and provision for sign languages, regional, minority, migrant, community or non-territorial languages, language training for the blind and visually impaired and possible other areas are targeted here. By looking at these additional languages the ECML wants to stress that

languages other than foreign and majority do belong to mainstream educational institutions catering for students' diversity. Students using particular languages for communication with their peers, at home or in any other environment should be given a platform of appreciation of this/these language(s) and space for further development of their skills. At the same time peer students (and their teachers) are invited to explore these languages and the culture their speakers represent.

### 3.2.4 Subject classroom

Languages play a key role in all subjects even if a particular language is not the subject matter. The successful development of cognitive academic language proficiency in subject areas has been identified as a key factor for educational achievement or, in the negative case, for failure. Therefore, the key to successful education is the ability to use the language in which schooling is offered.

In concrete terms, school subjects like natural science, for example, do not explicitly feature language on the curriculum but they rely to a great extent on the learner's ability to handle subject-specific instructions, expositions, argumentations, etc. given in the language(s) of schooling. The role of the majority language(s) is unchallenged in this context but there are pressing questions: how to provide access to and appropriate development in the majority language(s) for all in a situation of very diverse levels of language competences of the students in this/these language(s)? What is the role of the variety of languages present in the classroom and how can those languages be used for the *cognitive academic language proficiency* (CALP) of all students in the class?

In the area of content and language integrated learning, established as the CLIL approach, significant expertise has been built up to provide consultancy for subject teachers not trained in facilitating language learning.

### 3.2.5 Informal and non-formal language learning

From a life-long perspective, the learning that takes place in formal educational settings is covering only a limited period of time. This means that to a very significant and substantial degree learning is taking place in informal situations and in intentionally organised non-formal settings. It can be assumed, though, that formal education is paving the way for motivation and skills for autonomous language learning. Therefore, language educators can have a strong impact on whether language learning takes place outside school and how this may occur.

In this area, the ECML wants to explore provision for learning and settings that provide a low threshold for learners of any age inviting him or her to become interested, involved and committed to language learning. The effective use of new communication technology, the exploration of pedagogic approaches introduced with the *European Portfolio for Languages* are areas to explore in order to enhance the quality of life-long learning.

### 3.3 Expected outcomes and outputs

Expected outcomes of the programme include:

- awareness-raising related to the overarching long-term vision;
- promotion of inclusive, plurilingual and intercultural pedagogic approaches;
- initiated dialogue between professionals of language and subject-specific domains;
- involving new target groups (e.g. parents, the business sector).

Expected outputs of the programme include:

- networks comprising of target groups beyond the foreign language education sector;
- project publications responding to the ECML long-term vision and providing practical tools for quality education on classroom level;
- evidence of positive responses to implementation of the long-term vision through mediation activities;
- evidence of impact on learning reported by the stakeholders involved in the programme.

## 4. Conclusion

With its new medium-term programme, the ECML intends to **initiate** European cooperation in the areas indicated above, and **continue** the work in a coherent way through its future programmes of activities. The overarching aim is to raise awareness about the significance and inter-relation of inclusive, plurilingual and intercultural approaches in support of good quality education across all educational sectors. In concrete terms, the ECML intends to launch work that requires follow-up by member states if it is to successfully contribute to change and development on a national, regional and local level.

## References

- Council of Europe (2001): *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Council of Europe (2007): *From linguistic diversity to plurilingual education: Guide for the development of language education policies in Europe*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
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- Council of Europe (2010): *Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

## **Useful websites**

An updated list of relevant Council of Europe documents such as guides, policy papers, conference documents, case studies, other publications as well as web links can be found on the following websites:

Council of Europe:	<a href="http://www.coe.int">http://www.coe.int</a>
Language Policy Unit:	<a href="http://www.coe.int/lang">http://www.coe.int/lang</a>
European Language Portfolio:	<a href="http://www.coe.int/portfolio">http://www.coe.int/portfolio</a>
European Centre for Modern Languages:	<a href="http://www.ecml.at">http://www.ecml.at</a>
European Day of Languages:	<a href="http://www.coe.int/EDL">http://www.coe.int/EDL</a>