



EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR MODERN LANGUAGES

CENTRE EUROPEEN POUR LES LANGUES VIVANTES

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## **Project A1 – VALEUR**

**Valuing all languages in Europe**

### **Report of Central Workshop 2/2006**

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The report is accessible in English and in French on the ECML website: <http://www.ecml.at>

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## Summary

At least 365 languages are spoken in Europe today – an extraordinary richness and diversity which contributes to our society’s intellectual wealth. However, provision to learn and develop higher level proficiency in these languages varies widely from country to country and from language to language.

These were the findings from the first stage of the “VALEUR” (Valuing All Languages in Europe) project, which draws together 22 countries from Iceland to Armenia. The project aims to develop a shared perspective on the issue of ‘other languages’, defined as ‘all the languages currently in use in a society other than the official languages’. This includes ‘regional and minority’ languages, ‘migrant’ languages, sign languages and ‘non-territorial’ languages such as Romani.

Delegates from each of the participating countries who met in Graz on 8-11 March 2006 agreed to co-operate in raising awareness of the value of all languages, both to individuals and the wider society, and to share information designed to encourage the development of provision. This information will cover the range of languages present in each country, policies and good practices in provision. There will be a particular focus on sharing models of good practice with a wider audience.

It was agreed that one key focus should be on ‘migrant languages’, since this is a new issue for many countries and one which is increasingly on the agenda as mobility increases both within Europe and globally. There is relatively little support available for these languages either in terms of legal provision (migrant languages are not included in the Charter on Regional and Minority Languages), or in terms of support structures (associations, networks, institutions). The project will look specifically at how the Common European Framework and the European Language Portfolio can support these languages.

## Managing plurilingualism

Participants had taken a great deal of trouble gathering information about the situation of ‘other languages’ in their countries, and most had submitted this in advance of the workshop. The project will therefore be able to produce a substantial report.

Of the 365 languages already identified, some are the national language of another state, other languages are used in various countries, for example Arabic or Romany. Some languages are limited to a relatively small geographical area eg Frisian, spoken in the eastern Netherlands and northern Germany. Each country has at least one sign language.

People who speak other languages in addition to the ‘official’ or ‘national’ languages of the country in which they live are united in their need to make decisions about how to manage their plurilingualism, and in particular about the educational choices open to them. In some countries parents and children have choices about which language they will be educated in. In others they have no choice within the education system but still have to make choices about how far to support their children’s languages informally or through ‘complementary’ education. Because of immigration and

mobility, children are increasingly experiencing education through the medium of languages other than those they have grown up with. Research shows that this may be positive in contributing to the child's plurilingualism, as long as the mother tongue is maintained and developed as well. Parents have the right to pass on their linguistic and cultural heritage to their children. Plurilingualism is a core value of the Council of Europe, although not everyone sees this as self-evidently a good thing.

### **Talk by Joseph Lo Bianco**

An invited expert, Professor Joseph Lo Bianco from the University of Melbourne, also Honorary Professor at the University of Hong Kong, was able to put this question into a global perspective and provide inspiration on ways forward. He noted that globalisation seems to produce more, rather than less, diversity and at the same time requires us to take account of "difference" as at no other time in our history. There is more migration and more diversity. This means the relationship between territory, language and culture is changed. Plurilingualism is a fact that education systems need to plan for.

However, around the world it is common for multilingualism to be seen as a problem: it may be seen as inefficient, a threat to national identity or a problem in school. Professor Lo Bianco encouraged us to develop policies which see multilingualism as a resource: an intellectual resource for the children, a family and personal resource, an economic and social resource and a resource for citizenship.

He stressed that for children, their first languages are the means through which they think in the first few years of life. Schools operating through the medium of a language other than those which their pupils already know need to take into account the effect this is likely to have on children's ability to learn. Schools are about learning and should not be in the business of making people forget what they know. It is also important that they recognise the potential cognitive benefits which plurilingualism brings if the children's other languages are supported rather than suppressed. There are of course many other benefits to early plurilingualism, including, for example, the fact that people who have become plurilingual early in life recover more easily from brain damage in later years.

Languages are also an economic resource. Competition between societies is now fundamentally about the acquisition of knowledge and investment in human capital. Singapore provides an example of how multilingualism can support economic development. It has developed one of the most successful education systems in the world, disproving the idea that multilingualism is not economically efficient.

Language is not a neutral vehicle. It is full of culture and encoded knowledge. We need not see children who have grown up in a place far away from where their parents were born as necessarily in danger of becoming deficient speakers of their parents' language. Tigrinya speaking children in Australia were found to be blogging with others in Bologna and Argentina. We need to push education systems to recognise that such children have unique resources they can bring into school and can use this knowledge to enrich not only their language education but other subjects like Geography and History.

In sum, there are strong reasons why we should promote plurilingualism in all children, but this requires resourcing. Professor Lo Bianco advised us to use the resource argument rather than a rights argument and to gather evidence to demonstrate efficiency gains in literacy and language. There is a need to raise awareness of the resource which these languages represent and of their potential benefit to wider society in Europe.

## **Good practice**

Case studies of good practice presented at the workshop started to draw together models which are felt to be useful in demonstrating this. Many countries offer teaching through the medium of languages other than their national languages: e.g. in Slovakia, there are schools operating through the medium of Hungarian, Ruthenian, Ukrainian, and German. In Austria, Slovene and Italian are used as languages of instruction in a school near the Italian/Slovenian border. In Poland, there are fully bilingual curricula for both German and Lithuanian. There are various examples of bilingual schools in border areas, for example a Finnish/Russian school in Finland. There is growing interest in Chinese across Europe, and in Hungary a Chinese bilingual school has been set up in Budapest. In Poland, Kashubian has been the subject of a revival in the last 15 years. It is now taught to almost 6 000 children with over 120 qualified teachers.

Workshop participants heard of an inspiring project involving the Romani language in Austria which has raised social esteem and improved both the vitality of the language and intellectual capacity within the Roma community.

As well as identifying good practices in provision, the project will also bring together good practices in assessment, such as England's National Recognition Scheme or Languages Ladder, which is applicable to all languages (see: [http://www.dfes.gov.uk/languages/DSP\\_languagesladder.cfm](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/languages/DSP_languagesladder.cfm)), and in the provision of materials such as a Swedish website which provides access to print and web-based materials in a wide range of community languages (see: <http://modersmal.skolutveckling.se/projekt/index.php>).

An initiative of a primary school on the outskirts of London, *Language of the Month*, shows how it is possible to cater for 40 languages within a single school. So far, materials have been produced for 24 languages, used throughout the school of 700 children and in neighbouring schools, based on the children themselves demonstrating key words and phrases in their language (see: <http://www.newburypark.redbridge.sch.uk/langofmonth/>)

Despite these particular cases, in general, it was felt that most current examples of good practice were centred on 'regional or minority' languages rather than 'migrant' languages, and that the project had an important role to play in identifying these. It was also noted that most of the Europe-wide organisations set up to support languages other than the 'official' or 'national' languages of European states focus on 'regional and minority' languages: e.g. Mercator, EBLUL, the International Conference on Minority Languages.

## **Terminology**

The question of terminology is a crucial one: the term ‘community languages’ which is widely used and accepted in the UK, does not translate well into other languages, and one of the aims of the workshop was to discuss an agreed set of terms. It was recognised that a multiplicity of different terms were in use in the different languages, with different spans of meaning and connotation.

In France and some other countries, the direct translation of the term ‘community languages’ was understood to mean ‘Languages of the European Community’, whilst in Cyprus it was understood to mean either the Greek or the Turkish communities. Other terms were felt to have a pejorative connotation, eg ‘immigrant’ in the UK, ‘allochthonous’ in Holland, ‘minority’ (with overtones of ‘lesser’ in Greek and ‘foreign/other’ in Icelandic). In Latvia there was considerable overlap between ‘regional’ ‘minority’ and ‘immigrant’ languages. It was agreed that it is not possible to impose terms on people, and that the communities themselves may have a view on how their languages ought to be described. However, it was healthy to discuss, analyse and challenge existing terminology, in order to develop a way of describing what is a new mental reality for many.

It was agreed that the project would produce a glossary of existing terms in all languages represented by participants, rather than seeking translations of English terms.

## **Conclusion**

It is expected that the project will provide the most comprehensive picture yet of the languages in use in Europe. Previous surveys such as the *Multilingual Capital* survey of languages spoken in London have had a positive effect on people’s thinking, and it is hoped that this research will also contribute to a shift in awareness about the need to value all languages in Europe.

Participants made a series of recommendations and proposals which will be taken further at a follow-up meeting in October, and all agreed there was a full agenda for everyone, both within and alongside the scope of the project.

Thanks to everyone for a very successful and stimulating workshop.