Plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture: a Council of Europe Recommendation and its implications for the university sector*

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Abstract: Since the publication of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* in 2001, the Council of Europe has advocated a plurilingual and intercultural approach to (language) education. Despite the Council's best efforts, however, the concepts of plurilingualism and interculturality have made relatively little impact on the education systems of member states. In 2020 the CEFR's *Companion Volume* renewed the advocacy, and now, in 2022, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe has issued a Recommendation on plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture together with an Explanatory Memorandum. This paper explains the background to the Recommendation, summarizes what it asks of member states, and briefly explores its implications for higher education.

1 Introduction: the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers and its Recommendations

The Committee of Ministers, comprising the ministers of foreign affairs of the member states, is the decision-making body of the Council of Europe. Its function is to consider national approaches to European problems and to articulate collective responses to those problems, always with a focus on the organization's foundational values: human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Education is one of the areas with which the Committee of Ministers concerns itself, and Recommendations are one of the means by which it communicates with the governments of member states. Previous Recommendations in the educational domain have focused on teaching neighbouring languages in border regions (2005), strengthening the integration of children of migrants and of immigrant background (2008), the use of the CEFR and the promotion of plurilingualism (2008), ensuring quality education (2012), and the importance of competences in the language(s) of schooling for equity and quality in education and for educational success (2014). Only one of these Recommendations, on quality education, has implications for the whole of educational culture. It is now surpassed in its scope by the 2022 Recommendation on plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture, which seeks nothing less than a reconceptualization of education from the perspective of language and culture.

Recommendations issued by the Committee of Ministers follow a fixed structure. A preamble situates the Recommendation in relation to: the Council of Europe's values, aims, policies, Conventions and Charters; Resolutions and previous Recommendations of the Committee of Ministers; Recommendations of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly and Congress of Local and Regional Authorities; and the policy documents of sister organizations, for example the European Union, the United Nations and the OECD. The preamble is followed by the Recommendation proper, which is expressed as compactly as possible. Typically, it begins by inviting the governments of member states to implement the measures set out in the appendix, summarizes what implementation entails, and requests the Secretary General of the

Council of Europe to transmit the Recommendation to the governments of member states and the international organizations mentioned in the preamble. The appendix adds substance to the Recommendation, explaining its purpose, outlining its scope, defining key terms, listing the principles on which it is based, setting out the measures to be undertaken, and identifying the authorities, agencies and stakeholder groups whose cooperation should be sought. The Explanatory Memorandum provides a commentary on the successive sections of the Recommendation and its appendix, using the same structure and system of numbering to facilitate cross-referencing. Typically, Recommendations run to eight pages (about 3500 words) and Explanatory Memoranda to no more than twelve pages (about 8000 words).

The preparation of a Recommendation and its Explanatory Memorandum is managed by the section of the Council of Europe's secretariat responsible for the domain on which the Recommendation is focused. Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)1, on plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture, was prepared jointly by the Education Department in Strasbourg and the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz. The secretariat appoints an *ad hoc* working group made up of experts in the relevant field, drawn from as wide a range of member states as possible. For reasons of practicality the working group appoints a drafting sub-group which works with material submitted by the members of the working group. When the working group has produced a draft Recommendation and Explanatory Memorandum with which it is satisfied, the two documents are submitted to the scrutiny of the relevant statutory bodies, composed of representatives from the member states. In the case of Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)1, two statutory bodies were involved: the Standing Committee on Educational Policy and Practice in Strasbourg and the Governing Board of the ECML in Graz. When they have been approved by the statutory bodies, the documents are forwarded to the Committee of Ministers. Approval from the statutory bodies is interpreted to mean that no member state objects to the draft Recommendation.

2 Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)1, on plurilingual and intercultural education

2.1 Purpose and scope

Paragraph 1 of the appendix associates Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)1 with the Council of Europe's core values and policies: 'The efficient functioning of democracies depends on social inclusion and societal integration, which in turn depend on an understanding of, respect for and engagement with linguistic and cultural diversity.' Plurilingual and intercultural education is seen as a means of achieving these goals by fostering 'personal and professional development, equity, societal integration, the exercise of human rights and participation in democratic culture'. Paragraph 2 defines the scope of the Recommendation. Because plurilingual and intercultural education 'valorises all languages, spoken and signed, whether or not they have official status or are part of the official curriculum', the Recommendation has powerful implications for societies in general as well as for educational stakeholders.

2.2 Definitions

Paragraph 3 of the appendix draws on previous Council of Europe documents to define the following nine terms: *plurilingualism*, *multilingualism*, *plurilingual repertoire*, *intercultural competence*, *mediation*, *languages of schooling*, *home languages*, *additional languages*, and *plurilingual and intercultural education*. Plurilingualism (3.a) is 'the potential and/or actual

ability to use several languages to varying levels of proficiency and for different purposes' (Council of Europe 2007: 10); it comprises 'a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact' (Council of Europe 2001: 4). By contrast with plurilingualism, which is a characteristic of the individual, multilingualism is defined as the presence of two or more languages in a community (3.b). A plurilingual repertoire (3.c) comprises all the languages an individual is able to use. Those languages may have been learnt in different contexts and may be used for different purposes; sometimes two or more of them may be used in the same communicative event. Intercultural competence is defined as 'the capacity to approach other people with respect, openness and understanding; to argue for and justify one's own point of view in a sensitive and responsible manner; and to use one's experience of cultural diversity to reflect critically on issues that one usually takes for granted' (3.d). The last of the nine definitions (3.i) provides a measure of the ambition that underlies the Recommendation:

> 'Plurilingual and intercultural education' is a holistic concept that has an impact on all areas of education policy and practice. Setting out to foster the development of integrated linguistic repertoires in which languages interrelate and interact, it takes account of and seeks to bring into interaction with one another:
> i. the languages and cultures that learners bring with them, including sign, minority and migrant languages and cultures;
> ii. the languages of schooling, which vary in genre and terminology according to the different subjects taught and differ in significant ways from the language of informal everyday communication;
> iii. regional, minority and other languages and cultures that are part of the curriculum;
> iv. foreign languages (modern and classical);
> v. other languages and cultures that are not present in school and not part of the curriculum.

2.3 Principles

In paragraph 4 of the appendix, the Recommendation's summary of underlying principles recalls the foundational values with which the appendix began: plurilingual and intercultural education 'is essential to education for democratic culture' (4.i); 'respects and values linguistic and cultural diversity' (4.ii); 'promotes language awareness and language sensitivity across the curriculum' (4.iii); 'encourages critical reflection on cultural diversity' (4.iv); 'helps to foster critical digital literacy and digital citizenship' (4.v); 'encourages learner autonomy and values the learner's voice' (4.vi); and 'supports the inclusion of disadvantages and marginalised learners on an equal footing with other learners' (4.vii).

3 What Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)1 asks of member states

3.1 Measures

Paragraph 5 of the appendix sets out the measures that member states are invited to take. The paragraph is divided into three sections, the first of which is an introduction that serves three purposes. First, it reminds member states of the Recommendation's broad compass: it embodies 'a vision of education based on the Council of Europe's foundational values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law' (5.a.i). Second, it acknowledges that the full implementation of the Recommendation 'is the work of many years because it entails shifts not only in educational policy and practice but also in societal attitudes to linguistic and cultural diversity' (5.a.iii). And third, it insists that nevertheless much can be achieved by adjusting current policy and practice at institutional and classroom level, taking account of the specificities of the local context (5.a.iv–v).

The second section of paragraph 5 is concerned with policy and practice. The public authorities responsible for national, regional and institutional policy are invited to review existing policies with a view to 'strengthening plurilingual and intercultural education and supporting linguistic and cultural diversity' (5.b.i). This entails making explicit the language dimension in all curriculum subjects (5.b.ii); ensuring that curricula support the development of plurilingual repertoires (5.b.iii); encouraging the learning of additional languages from an early age (5.b.iv); reflecting on traditional linguistic hierarchies and seeking to diversify the range of languages offered (5.b.v); promoting the teaching of languages in interaction with one another (5.b.vi); encouraging and facilitating communication and collaboration between teachers of different languages and different curriculum subjects (5.b.vii); and promoting bilingual and immersion education and CLIL (content and language integrated learning) (5.b.viii). Within this capacious framework, paragraph 5 invites the same public authorities to: explore ways of including in the educational process home languages, signed as well as spoken, that are not part of the official curriculum (5.b.ix); take steps to ensure the quality of language learning (5.b.x); support the development of complex learning environments and appropriate teaching and learning resources (5.b.xi–xii); encourage pedagogical approaches that foster learner autonomy, develop critical thinking skills, and promote language and cultural awareness (5.b.xiii–xiv); and encourage the adoption of whole-school/institution-wide approaches to linguistic and intercultural policy and practice (5.b.xv).

The third section of paragraph 5 is addressed to institutions and agencies responsible for initial and in-service teacher education. They are encouraged to: assign a central role to the principles and concepts that underpin plurilingual and intercultural education (5.c.i); challenge traditional attitudes, beliefs and preconceptions regarding language, language learning, plurilingualism, culture and intercultural learning (5.c.ii); develop 'student teachers' and teachers' own plurilingual and intercultural competences as an essential dimension of their pedagogical competences' (5.c.iii); engage teachers in a detailed exploration of the pedagogical implications of plurilingual and intercultural approaches (5.c.iv); help teachers to develop 'the pedagogical competences needed to manage linguistic and cultural diversity' (5.c.v) and to 'support a democratic classroom culture that fosters autonomous learning and critical thinking' (5.c.vi) and assessment competences that take account of plurilingual and intercultural learning (5.c.vii); encourage teacher mobility as an important aspect of professional development (5.c.viii); and develop teachers' 'competences in action research so that they can contribute to the evidence-based development of educational policy and practice' (5.c.ix).

3.2 Cooperation

The last paragraph of the appendix is concerned with the wide range of partners on whose cooperation successful implementation of plurilingual and intercultural education will depend: civil society, employers, the private sector and multiple stakeholder groups (6.a); parents and legal guardians (6.b); academic associations and teachers' and lecturers' unions (6.c); and the Council of Europe itself (6.d).

4   Implications of Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)1 for higher education

Two sub-paragraphs of the Recommendation proper refer to universities. Governments of member states should 'invite higher education institutions to review their policy and practices with a view to ensuring that their graduates are equipped with the linguistic and cultural resources needed to participate in the democratic processes of Europe's diverse societies' (1.d);

and they should 'encourage universities and other competent institutions and agencies to engage in research that contributes to international understanding of plurilingualism and intercultural dialogue at all educational levels and in all educational domains' (1.e). In other words, the Recommendation urges universities to review their educational and research policy and practice from the perspective of plurilingual and intercultural education.

4.1 Developing, adopting and implementing an institutional language policy

When it comes to deciding what and how they teach, universities enjoy a high degree of autonomy. In principle, however, the measures set out in paragraph 5.b of the appendix to the Recommendation apply to universities and other institutions of higher education as well as to schools and colleges of further and vocational education. As the concluding definition in paragraph 3 of the appendix makes plain (see section 2.2 above), plurilingual and intercultural education reaches far beyond the traditional boundaries of language teaching and learning. Its linguistic and cultural scope embraces all the languages that learners bring with them and whatever cultural affinities and competences knowledge of those languages entails; while its educational range is all-encompassing because it includes the language dimension of all curriculum subjects and disciplines. This poses a double challenge to universities, where languages are usually discussed as components of the curriculum and the language that is the principal medium of teaching and learning – the language of instruction – is rarely an issue of debate except in the case of EMI (English medium instruction) and LAP (language for academic purposes). Responding to this double challenge requires a readiness to question and perhaps overturn hallowed traditions.

Clearly, if universities are to engage with the concept of plurilingual and intercultural education and respond to the challenges it poses, they must begin by making an institutional commitment to do so. In other words, they must develop, adopt and be prepared to implement an institutional language policy. The question immediately arises: Who should be given or assume responsibility for initiating this process and carrying it through to a conclusion? In perhaps a majority of European universities the language centre is the most likely candidate for this task, especially as it can draw on support from CercleS – the European Confederation of Language Centres in Higher Education – which has issued a statement on language policy in higher education. The statement begins with this assertion: 'Fostering plurilingualism is a fundamental element of European Higher Education', and it has many other points of contact with Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)1.

4.2 From policy to practice

An institutional language policy informed by the overarching concept of plurilingual and intercultural education will align itself, at least by implication, with the purpose summarized in Paragraph 1 of the appendix to the Recommendation, which links respect for and engagement with linguistic and cultural diversity to social inclusion and societal integration (section 2.1 above). But how is this purpose to be fulfilled in practice? According to the definition of plurilingual and intercultural education quoted at the end of section 2.2 above, the essential goal is to develop 'integrated linguistic repertoires in which languages interrelate and interact'; and that goal is to be achieved by bringing into interaction with one another 'the languages and cultures that learners bring with them', 'the languages of schooling, which vary in genre and terminology' across the curriculum, and 'languages and cultures that are part of the curriculum' (traditionally foreign languages).

Universities in the non-English-speaking world already fulfil part of this requirement by providing their students with courses in English for Academic Purposes and (we must suppose) encouraging them to explore the linguistic and cultural differences between discipline-specific genres in English and whatever language is the principal medium of teaching and learning. In order to conform to the plurilingual and intercultural ideal, the same courses should also include the languages that international and visiting students bring with them. This does not imply a need for additional teaching: students themselves should be required to include their home languages in their studies. Degree courses that are taught through the medium of English can contribute to the development of their students' plurilingual (academic) repertoires by involving them in the same kind of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural exploration.

I have noted that in universities as in schools, there is no general recognition of the central role that language plays in *all* education: the language of teaching and learning is for all practical purposes transparent, and attention is rarely paid to explicitly developing students' mastery of the written genres central to their discipline. But this too is a component of plurilingual and intercultural education, and it is most likely to be raised to general awareness by well-designed EAP or EMI programmes that engage with plurilingual and intercultural principles in the way I have indicated.

4.3 Research

The expert groups that the Council of Europe appoints to draft Recommendations are mostly composed of academics who are actively engaged in relevant research. The Council does its best to ensure that Recommendations promote measures that coincide with research-informed principles and research-based evidence, but it does not itself fund or coordinate research. There are two ways in which the research function of universities can support the implementation of Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)1. The first is indirect: almost any research that focuses on language or culture has the potential to illuminate the concepts on which plurilingual and intercultural education is founded. The second is direct: the implementation of any measure proposed by Recommendation CM/R(2022)1 can be explored empirically or by using the methods of Action Research (e.g., Burns 2009) or Exploratory Practice (e.g., Hanks 2017). Publication of research findings ensures that they are available to inform the Council of Europe's further work in language education.

4.4 Educational leadership

The extent to which the governments of member states disseminate Council of Europe Recommendations to the relevant authorities, institutions, agencies and stakeholders is variable. I have no idea whether the university in which I worked for forty years received Recommendations from the Irish government, but if it did, they went no further. In such circumstances one must hope that a university's linguists, applied linguists and language education specialists become independently aware of Recommendations and raise awareness of them via personal networks and professional associations. Here again there is an obvious role for CercleS to play on its own account and as a member of the Professional Network Forum of the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz. Of course, universities are more likely to succeed as advocates of Council of Europe Recommendations if their own policy and practice seeks to comply with them.

References

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