

Quality language education for a democratic, socially cohesive and peaceful Europe: nine ECML cornerstones

The Council of Europe has played a key role in bringing about positive change in the field of language education across Europe and beyond, broadening the aims from an exclusive focus on modern foreign languages to embrace areas such as plurilingual, cultural and cognitive competences. By capitalising on learners' individual linguistic repertoires, it places democratic citizenship and human rights at the core of learning and teaching, promoting linguistic and cultural diversity in the pursuit of quality education for all.

Although many countries have embraced this positive change, they are hampered in their progress by a wider political climate of growing intolerance towards other people, cultures and the languages they speak, by limited financial resources and by compartmentalised education systems. A significant gap remains between the Council's holistic vision for language education and the reality on the ground.

The ECML, situated at the interface between policy, research, teacher education and practice is in a unique position to help member states bridge this gap.

We, the ECML member states, experts and wider stakeholders, recognise the occasion of the ECML's 25th Anniversary as an opportunity to raise awareness of the political importance of quality language education and of its contribution to democratic, peaceful societies.

With this Declaration, we pledge to work together to ensure that our common vision of inclusive, plurilingual and intercultural education becomes a reality in member states. We wish to highlight nine interrelated ECML cornerstones which underpin the realisation of this mission.

Current challenges

In society at large and at all levels of education, the loss of support for the learning of more than one foreign language and, as a consequence, the lack of interest in neighbouring and less widely spoken languages, together with misconceptions about the place of home languages, are just some of the issues which merit close attention. There is a need to diversify the offer of languages taught in educational institutions and to ensure that language learning facilitates integration in schools and in the workplace. As language development is a lifelong learning process, including formal, non-formal and informal learning, sustained pedagogical and structural support is required so that learners can develop their potential and participate as active citizens in society.



The role of the ECML

The ECML recognises the importance of pedagogical approaches which are differentiated according to learner needs and to specific language contexts (home/first, second, foreign, regional, of migration, in subjects etc.). It values all those working in the field from early years through to adult education, and contributes to their professionalisation by providing access to innovative resources and to transformative development opportunities. It supports professionals in their quest to respond to today's increasingly complex challenges and to embrace an inclusive, plurilingual and intercultural rationale, which draws on all languages in learner repertoires as resources.

Through networks at national and international level and through its strong partnership with the European Commission, the ECML is a driving force in disseminating and implementing quality language education.

Towards a Policy Recommendation

The Council of Europe believes the time is ripe to develop a new policy recommendation underlining the political importance of plurilingual education. We welcome this initiative and propose that this Anniversary Declaration be drawn on in the development of such a recommendation.

Nine ECML cornerstones

Within a holistic vision for language education which puts learners at the centre, the ECML has identified nine cornerstones – key aspects of language education which reflect the complexity and range of evolving learner needs. Special competences are required so that language professionals can respond appropriately to these different needs. At the same time, these cornerstones interrelate and interact and the boundaries between them are permeable. The specific ways in which each cornerstone contributes to this holistic vision are listed below.

Plurilingual and intercultural education



By recognising that quality language education is an issue of human rights, social justice and democratic citizenship, whose central objective is to foster the personal development of the individual as an autonomous social agent with rights and responsibilities within pluralist societies; by implementing plurilingual and intercultural education so that learners develop a language repertoire in which all linguistic abilities have a place.

Teacher and learner competences



By supporting teachers and learners to develop values and attitudes which show respect for and openness to otherness; by facilitating the development of linguistic, communicative, cultural and plurilingual competences needed to participate fully in culturally diverse societies; by fostering innovative pedagogies appropriate to specific educational contexts.

Languages of schooling



By supporting all students in the development of competences in the language(s) of schooling and subject-specific discourses as an essential means of ensuring access to quality education; by encouraging schools to adopt a whole-school approach to language education; by creating learning environments where learners can enrich their full cultural and linguistic repertoires.

New media



By encouraging language professionals to engage with interconnected, global education models and find innovative ways to make language learning and teaching more effective; by developing digital literacy through task-based, collaborative, experiential pedagogy; by ensuring that technology is used to help learners become responsible and critical users of media.

Content and language integrated learning



By contributing to the development of autonomous, analytical and critical thinking skills through a pluriliteracies agenda where learners develop linguistic and cultural literacies across languages and disciplines; by enhancing the quality not only of the language itself but of the depth of conceptual understanding in different subjects.

Migrant education and employment



By supporting the linguistic and social integration of migrants through a two-way process which enables them to acquire the language of the host country and facilitates access to the labour market, whilst acknowledging and respecting their own languages and cultures; by facilitating the acquisition of language for professional purposes and work-related knowledge.

Sign languages



By recognising that sign languages are part of Europe's collective cultural and linguistic capital; by ensuring that signers are afforded full access to the same range of educational opportunities and language-rich environments as those offered for spoken languages; by providing training opportunities and developing materials that will benefit teachers of sign languages.

Early language learning



By fostering favourable attitudes toward other languages and other cultures, thus setting the scene for openness to and respect for diversity; by encouraging teachers to embrace age-appropriate communicative and interactive pedagogies; by providing access to training modules and support materials.

Curricula and evaluation



By enhancing autonomous learning through transparent, personalised goal-setting and the use of formative evaluation tools such as the European Language Portfolio; by facilitating the integration of Council of Europe reference frameworks into curricula and into both formative and summative assessment processes.