

FROM CRISIS TO SUSTAINABILITY: POLICY GUIDELINES ON SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGE EDUCATION

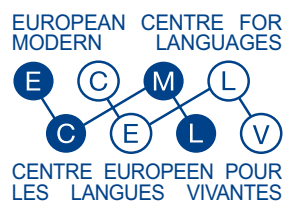
Excerpt from the publication
“Rethinking language education
after the experience of Covid”

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As an Enlarged Partial Agreement of the Council of Europe situated at the interface between policy, teacher education and classroom practice and in constant dialogue with ministries, national networks, individual experts and NGOs across Europe and beyond, the ECML is in a unique position to develop innovative, research-informed responses to challenges in language education. One such challenge, whose repercussions will continue for years to come, was the Covid pandemic; one such response is this set of policy guidelines and accompanying publication, the final output of the initiative "*Language education in the light of Covid: lessons learned and ways forward*". The brainchild of Eaquals, one of the 16 member institutions of the ECML's Professional Network Forum which brings together INGOs with common values and complementary expertise, and co-funded through the ECML's Cooperation Agreement with the European Commission, this initiative is a wonderful example of what can be achieved when we work together in the service of quality language education.

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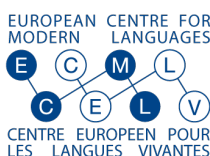
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From crisis to sustainability: Policy Guidelines on supporting the development of language education

The Policy Guidelines below are based on the educational insights gained from surveys of language teachers and language learners about their experiences during the Covid pandemic reported on in Part 1 of the publication *Rethinking language education after the experience of Covid*. They arise from research and consultation activities carried out in 2021 and 2022 under the auspices of the ECML and members of its Professional Network Forum as part of the *Future of language education in the light of Covid* initiative. The Guidelines are intended to assist and provide food for thought for policy makers in education authorities in Council of Europe member states. They are also relevant for those at institutional level responsible for overseeing and managing language education and the provision of teacher education for future and practising language teachers.

The Guidelines concern not only contingency planning for adjusted face-to-face, remote and hybrid language learning in emergency situations, such as were experienced during the Covid pandemic, and which may well be necessary in future emergencies resulting from disease, natural disasters, or armed conflict. They also address opportunities to develop and enhance language education in non-emergency circumstances which have flowed from insights and experience gained during the Covid emergency.

It needs to be borne in mind that, in many cases, the implications of the Covid emergency for language education are inseparable from its implications for education across the curriculum, and many of the Guidelines may be equally applicable to other subject areas. In the Guidelines below we have, where possible, taken account of the special nature of language education.



Policy Guidelines for teaching and learning: language education, a special case?

Language learning, whether in schools or in higher and further education, was seriously affected by lockdowns during the Covid emergency. During remote language teaching and learning, which poses different challenges for language teachers than for teachers of other non-language subjects (such as science or history), approaches had to be adapted and a different and potentially wider and richer range of teaching and learning activities and resources was needed to maintain the oral interaction with and among learners that is essential to language learning.

Language learning involves the development of language skills as well as knowledge and awareness of how the language in question works. The Council of Europe's Common European Framework for Languages Companion Volume (CEFR CV) provides details of the spectrum of skills that need to be developed. For many language teachers, the opportunity to use in their teaching a range of mainly digital tools and resources that had not been part of their language teaching repertoire was an eye-opener. Comments made by language teachers and learners in the surveys showed that many believed the experience gained during the Covid emergency can and should be used to enrich language education in 'normal' times.

A. In order to ensure well organised, varied and effective language learning when there is a need to respond to emergency situations and when face-to-face teaching is unsafe or restricted, decision makers at all levels must plan for adaptability and flexibility by:

- i. defining at policy level a clear rationale for selecting remote or hybrid modes of learning and ensuring that the necessary practical and technical arrangements are made and are clearly communicated to all stakeholders;
- ii. being prepared to adjust the structure of the timetable and the curriculum at short notice in response to changing circumstances, and offering teachers two or more pathways where feasible, allowing them to diverge from the curriculum if necessitated by circumstances;
- iii. providing teachers at all educational levels with effective orientation, support and good digital and other resources to enable them to adapt to these changes and to plan flexibility and variety into their teaching; this also means rethinking initial and in-service teacher education;
- iv. investing in targeted professional learning and collaboration opportunities for language teachers and other teachers, whether they are working in schools or in higher or further education; these must enable them to set clear lesson objectives and to consider how best to respond effectively to mixed ability and individual needs among language learners, taking into account the different learning environments (e.g. remote or face-to-face);

Examples:

- Teachers and future teachers should be guided in the use of descriptors in the CEFR and its CV for setting objectives and planning activities that focus on interaction and mediation suitable for the mode of teaching, whether face-to-face, restricted, remote, or hybrid.
 - Where necessary, teachers should be able quickly to adapt or change the resources and activities they are using according to the context of learning, for example when they move from whole class teaching to work in small groups or breakout rooms, and/or to cater for learners with mixed ability.
- v. supporting teachers in planning flexibility and variety into their teaching whether in remote, hybrid or face-to-face learning environments, and providing teachers with help in taking account of learners' real-world experiences in their teaching;

Example: Teachers need to be able to devise and manage project-based language learning options involving both interaction during the lesson and individual work between lessons.

- vi. developing a wider range of versatile language learning resources, including digital resources, and ensuring teachers and learners are able to use them effectively;

Example: In their planning of remote or face-to-face lessons, teachers should find a balance between, on the one hand, using a variety of technological and other options and resources for doing collaborative work, and, on the other, the simplicity of selecting a standard preferred technology within a clearly defined methodological framework.

- vii. ensuring teachers define and explain to learners the role and purpose of each resource/tool/app used for remote or face-to-face learning.

Policy Guidelines for evaluation and assessment of language learning: adapting to different circumstances

During the Covid emergency normal procedures for evaluating learners' achievements during periods of learning, whether lasting one month, a trimester, a semester or a whole year, were disrupted. In many contexts, whether in schools or in higher and further education, it was decided that normal procedures involving secure, reliable and validated examinations or tests were not possible, except in some systems where online testing was already established for evaluating certain competences. Often teachers were asked to carry out alternative forms of assessment in the course of their teaching so that learners could be awarded a grade. These situations were a challenge for institutions, teachers and learners, and parents were often concerned about a possible slippage of standards, including in national examination systems. In many instances teachers needed to devise activities and select or create resources that would enable them to regularly monitor learners' progress across the language skills and according to indicators (such as CEFR descriptors) that were specified in the syllabus. On the other hand, the emergency situation highlighted the important role that teachers have in carrying out continuous assessment and providing feedback to learners.

These guidelines were taken from the publication *"Rethinking language education after the experience of Covid"*
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B. Increase and enhance the range of assessment procedures in all language learning by:

- i. ensuring that any reduction or suspension of formal examinations and testing is compensated for by valid, reliable and well-resourced alternative assessment measures;
- ii. specifying formative assessment (assessment for learning) in language education curricula and ensuring teachers carry out this kind of assessment to complement language exams and tests, also in normal circumstances;
- iii. giving teachers the skills to use these continuous assessment techniques effectively and to provide supportive feedback to learners;

Example: Peer and self-assessment, which serve as a means of enhancing learner autonomy, should also be regular features of formative assessment in foreign language teaching and learning.

- iv. ensuring that the methods of assessment used and the underlying principles are made transparent to all stakeholders;
- v. enhancing the validity and reliability of resources and techniques for continuous or alternative assessment of language learning.

Policy Guidelines on supporting language learners

The emergency arrangements made during the Covid pandemic, such as periodic lockdowns and mandatory mask-wearing, were difficult for learners and their parents. Many learners commented on the challenges of coping with sudden isolation from their classmates and being required to stay at home. Learners were greatly affected by the lack of opportunities for socialising with one another in the school environment. While authorities made every effort to put in place arrangements for remote schooling, in larger and especially in disadvantaged families this presented difficulties due to lack of the necessary equipment, lack of study space etc. As a result, some learners were unable to participate regularly and were unable to keep up with their peers. These difficulties were especially significant for language education in which social interaction is normally an integral part of each lesson and a key means of developing skills in the spoken language as well as self-confidence, especially for learners whose ability to use the language of schooling is still limited and who need regular opportunities to use it with their peers.

Such challenges would apply in any emergency situation where face-to-face learning in the school environment is not possible and when individual learners are unable to attend school for a period due to illness or other difficulties. The experience of the Covid pandemic demonstrated the importance of putting in place effective measures to support learners at any time both in their learning and emotionally.

C. Promote social interaction as well as individualised learning by:

- i. ensuring teachers are conscious of the key role of ‘social participation’, especially in remote and hybrid language education, and make appropriate provision for it in their teaching;
- ii. supporting teachers in achieving an effective balance between whole class work and interactive sequences.

Example: Teachers need to be able to set up regular smaller group activities and tasks, whether face-to-face or online, to encourage socialisation and peer language learning, and as a complement to whole class learning. Such activities may also enhance the wellbeing of learners who feel isolated or left out.

D. Nurture language learners’ wellbeing by:

- i. putting in place sound structures and measures for responding to the specific wellbeing needs of learners, including during periods of lockdown, for example by means of a communication platform;
- ii. making teachers and learners aware of the measures in D i. and ensuring that they are applied effectively;

Example: in the case of online (as well as face-to-face) language learning, such measures can include making sure that some tasks are dedicated to maintaining social links and interaction among learners and organising catch-up or ‘checking-in’ sessions with sub-groups of learners, such as those who have not logged into online learning. These steps may help fill in gaps and encourage motivation and resilience.

- iii. where feasible, providing additional individualised support for disadvantaged language learners and those who need extra help, especially those who are temporarily unable to attend school and those for whom the language of schooling is not their first language;
- iv. encouraging language teachers to take advantage of the special potential of language lessons (more so than other lessons) to serve as a forum where problems can be raised and discussed as part of learning activities.

E. Broaden learners’ experience of language learning and learning in general by:

- i. encouraging all teachers to develop their learners’ digital skills and to use and familiarise learners with a wider variety of language teaching/learning activities and resources including apps, games, video materials etc.

Example: Teachers may wish to use new apps, audio/video clips and language learning tasks, such as memory games, opinion polls, role plays and scenarios, which learners are unfamiliar with. Steps need to be taken to carefully introduce these, explain their purpose and demonstrate how they function.

- ii. ensuring that, especially in online language education, teachers take steps to:
- bridge the gaps in learning which may exist for some learners due to absence or inability to access the internet, or do certain tasks, or use important learning resources;
 - through working individually or in small groups, enable these learners to hear and interact in the target language more intensively than is feasible in whole class lessons;
 - ask learners to give their opinions on the language learning tasks and resources used and take their feedback into account when planning future online or face-to-face lessons.

F. Help language learners to develop greater autonomy by:

- i. highlighting in the curriculum the importance of learners taking responsibility for their language learning and of helping each other through peer learning;
- ii. asking teachers to ensure that independent learning away from the screen or outside the classroom between sessions is built into their language courses.

Example: Teachers need to become skilled at preparing learners to do independent practical language work alone or in pairs/groups between lessons. This can include researching a topic in the language, working on relevant vocabulary and expressions, preparing short presentations etc. Opportunities then need to be provided during whole class work for them to share their work and receive feedback on it.

Policy Guidelines on supporting language teachers

During the Covid emergency, teachers, including language teachers, found themselves suddenly under greater pressure than their experience had so far prepared them for. They had to adapt quickly to teaching online, using technologies that many were unfamiliar with and to preparing lessons and resources that were viable for the required mode of teaching. In addition, they needed to develop means of dealing with the difficulties some learners had in adjusting to the new learning environment. Many language teachers found it stressful to cope with the unfamiliarity of these pressures and the sense of being cut off from support. Given the social nature of language learning, they were especially concerned that remote language learning would result in some learners falling behind.

Teachers are likely to experience such pressures in any situation that necessitates sudden changes in their teaching routine. On the other hand, some teachers also found that remote teaching offered opportunities to experiment with a range of technological and organisational options that enriched their teaching and the language learning experience and decided to use these in their teaching after the Covid emergency. Moreover, the periods of lockdown gave teachers experience and insights that would be valuable in any future emergency situation when face-to-face teaching is not feasible.

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G. Help individual teachers safeguard their own wellbeing by:

ensuring that good support is available to help individual teachers to deal with the demands on their personal mental resources during periods when remote teaching is necessary or when there is disruption.

Examples:

- Individual counselling can be offered that allows teachers to express their concerns or specific needs for assistance.
- Where feasible, teachers can be offered a mix of teaching and non-teaching duties, such as materials development or student counselling, to alleviate pressure.

H. Help teachers to prepare for and adjust to emergency or exceptional teaching circumstances by:

giving teachers guidance when the normal language syllabus cannot be followed.: this should include guidance on how to relieve the strain on their wellbeing by prioritising language learning objectives, reducing the volume of work to be covered and using appropriate and effective digital resources and activities

I. Provide adaptive professional learning opportunities by:

offering language teachers targeted professional learning opportunities that address their specific individual and group needs, especially when teachers are unable to attend school and work in close cooperation with colleagues. Time to take full advantage of these opportunities should be allotted.

Example: School managers should make provision for and encourage language teachers to set up self-run interdisciplinary 'communities of practice' at institutional and, where feasible, at national and/or international level.

J. Consult language teachers about their professional needs by:

asking them to reflect on and give details of their most urgent individual teaching-related needs and to make suggestions about the focus of their professional learning opportunities.

Example: Language teachers should be invited to request training in the use of specific digital resources they wish to use and/or to suggest and share digital and other language learning materials and activities that they have researched and tried out, whether in remote or face-to-face teaching.

K. Ensure that specific orientation and support concerning the assessment of learners' progress and achievement is given to teachers by:

- i. providing them with full information about changes in the end of semester or end of year examination routine, and enabling them to prepare their learners for these changes;
 - ii. guiding teachers in the use of effective means of formative assessment throughout the year as a complement to formal testing or, where appropriate, as a replacement.
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Policy Guidelines on developing educational adaptability, flexibility and versatility

At the outset of the initiative, the intention was to differentiate the research from other surveys concerning the impact of the Covid pandemic by focusing on its specific effects on language education, and this is still the primary aim. However, in the responses to the survey, especially in the open questions, more general views were expressed by both learners and teachers, as well as by participants in Think Tanks, workshops and colloquia organised by the ECML, concerning broader aspects of learning and teaching. These can be categorised in four main areas:

- the need to understand the educational processes and the competences required to learn and teach successfully;
- the importance of digital skills and of being able to use a range of both general and specifically educational software and applications;
- the ability to redesign or adapt approaches to and means of education in an agile and imaginative way in response to unexpected environmental or other changes;
- the educational measures needed to safeguard and enhance the wellbeing of learners and teachers.

These concerns, which are implicit in many - perhaps most - of the Guidelines above, can be united in a general concept of 'educational adaptability', which may be helpful in defining strategies for education and for language education in the future. For the purposes of these Guidelines, 'educational adaptability' means the preparedness of educational authorities and institutions to put in place effective arrangements to cope with sudden or emerging emergency situations and to prepare teachers, especially language teachers, to use effectively a very wide range of options in their teaching. It also means ensuring that learners can take full advantage of richer and more varied opportunities in their language learning and in learning how to learn.

L. Develop greater educational adaptability among language education professionals by:

- i. using a risk assessment procedure as preparation for contingency planning (a sample template for risk assessment and a worked example are available www.ecml.at/template-risk-assessment]);
- ii. encouraging heads of department and directors of language studies to consult and work with teachers to explore why and how they have used various alternative language teaching techniques and resources, including digital resources, in situations such as the Covid emergency;
- iii. enabling teachers, through professional and peer learning and communities of practice:
 - to gain broader experience of the many options available in educational settings;
 - to compare and reflect on these experiences;
 - to discuss relevant theories as well as their practical implications;
 - to select wisely from a broader and deeper range of alternatives in their teaching and learning.

This would help to prepare teachers for eventualities such as emergencies in which they are required to adapt quickly and efficiently to new circumstances and would encourage them to contribute to the development of language education in the future.

Example: in organised sharing sessions, language teachers could be invited to give accounts and demonstrations of teaching activities and resources such as apps that they found especially effective and motivating for learners during the Covid emergency and beyond it. This could be supported by peer observation or simulated micro teaching within the group.

M. Give language learners experience of a much wider range of learning options by:

- i. asking learners to reflect on, compare and discuss various types of teaching and learning and different resources for learning that they have experienced directly in specially designed series of lessons or that they have observed in video clips of teaching;
- ii. taking advantage of the special characteristics of language education to promote discussion of and feedback on the reasons why certain activities and resources are selected for given purposes and are preferred and found to be more useful by given learners.

Example: the surveys carried out as part of this ECML-EU initiative indicate that, due to the importance of communication and collaboration in language education, language teachers used more varied digital tools and activities during lockdowns, and used them more frequently, than teachers of other subjects. Language teachers and learners themselves can play a role in developing learners' general digital competences alongside their language competences.

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