

Empowering Language Professionals ECML Professional Network Forum, Graz, 7th January 2010

1) Partner Profile

The European Commission fosters and promotes language learning at all levels in order to empower citizens to make full use of the opportunities created by the European project. At the same time it promotes multilingualism to preserve linguistic diversity in Europe and as a link to other cultures. This is achieved mainly via the Lifelong Learning Programme and by means of policy instruments, such as the Communication adopted in September 2008 entitled "Multilingualism an asset for Europe and a shared commitment". The European Commission also seeks to raise awareness of the importance of language skills for a healthy European economy and for social cohesion. Its comprehensive policy approach seeks to involve all Commission departments as well as the Member States. In addition to organising conferences, seminars, and information campaigns it commissions studies and monitors policy developments and their implementation.

2) Partner Highlights

The European Commission contributes to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting their responsibility for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity.

In the field of language teaching the European Commission co-operates with language teaching professionals, not only teachers themselves in all sectors of education and training, but others working in the field such as policy makers, teacher trainers, researchers, counsellors and facilitators, project managers, inspectors and advisers.

The Commission pursues cooperation with the Member States in the context of the "open method of coordination" (OMC) in education and training. The initial priority themes are early language learning and business and employability. The Commission set up a dedicated thematic group on each of them. The OMC is now complemented by a "structured dialogue" with the main stakeholder organisations *via* two platforms: a business platform promoting multilingualism for competitiveness and employability in Europe and a civil society platform promoting multilingualism in Europe in the areas of culture, media and non formal education.

3) Burning Issues

While linguistic diversity is a source of benefit and richness, it can also widen the communication gap between people of different cultures and increase social divisions. It can prevent EU citizens and businesses from fully exploiting the opportunities offered by the single market and hinder cross-border cooperation.

The main issue is to minimise these obstacles and to empower individuals and businesses to take advantage of the opportunities in the global and multilingual society of today. It is also to show that languages can be an asset, for the benefit of the European society as a whole.

Although considerable progress has been made concerning the Barcelona objective (mother tongue + 2 foreign languages), two main problems remain to be tackled: knowledge of foreign languages remains insufficient; European citizens, companies and service providers are not fully aware of assets as well as of challenges of linguistic diversity in Europe.

Integration of third-country nationals is an essential component of the EU comprehensive immigration policy. Basic knowledge of the host society's language and culture is indispensable to integration.

Concrete measures are also necessary to reach a large part of the European society which is still missing of the advantages of the multilingualism, such as those who still are monolingual or still struggle with their first foreign language, school drop outs, seniors and other adults no longer in education.

Language skills are in high demand on the labour market. Lack of language skills is one of the most significant obstacles to intra-EU mobility of workers. Not only large companies operating on international markets, but to an increasing extent also small companies and public administrations are looking for multilingual people.

4) Action Points (selection)

Early Language Learning (ELL)

- OMC group on ELL
- Piccolingo information campaign on ELL

Employability and Competitiveness

- The "business platform"
- OMC group on business and employability
- Information campaign for SMEs

Social inclusion and integration

- Civil society platform
- Learning of the language of the host country
- Deepening of the language of origin of immigrants

Language teaching

- Improving initial and in-service language teacher training
- Removing obstacles from teacher's mobility
- Developing models for teaching classes of multiple linguistic backgrounds

5) ECML projects

To be discussed during the meeting.

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