



The first ten years of the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz – its contribution to language teaching

by Frank Heyworth

The mission of the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) in Graz is to contribute to the dissemination and implementation of good practice, and its work is having a growing influence on the way languages are taught in Europe. Its activities complement those of the other organ of the Council of Europe involved in language education, the Language Policy Division in Strasbourg, whose work on the development of a Common European Framework and the European Language Portfolios and on formulating policies for promoting plurilingualism has had a major impact on language teaching around Europe.

The ECML is currently half way through its second medium term programme – *Languages for social cohesion: language education in a multilingual and multicultural Europe*. In its first ten years, some 500 experts and over 5000 language educators have taken part in the Centre's various workshops and projects. They have worked on an impressive range of themes, and the 40 publications already produced constitute a significant and useful body of work.

The publications are all the result of collaborative work between experts and the language educators in the field, and seek to be practical and usable. Among the areas which have been addressed are:

Practical approaches to putting the Common European Framework into practice

One example of this is a project and publication on the "[Bergen can do](#)" project. This describes how the level descriptors and the "can do" statements of the Framework and the Portfolio were used in primary schools and gave added focus and motivation to language learning. The approach developed in Norway was applied in a number of other countries by participants in the project who – and this is typical of the way the ECML works – formed a network sharing ideas and results. A project in the present medium-term programme is preparing a practical handbook for using European Language Portfolios, and another is providing examples of good practice and support materials for the Portfolio.

Creative approaches to teaching languages to young children

A project in the first medium term project was called "[Janua Linguarum, the Gateway to Languages](#)" and consisted of a Europe-wide project which developed materials and approaches to developing awareness of languages among young children; the project was not based on learning a specific language, but on encouraging the children to become aware of a range of different languages and to learn to accept and respect other



ways of communicating. Another project used e-mail and the Internet for collaborative story telling among primary school children in different countries, and a further one explored more generally the use of [ICT with young learners](#).

Developing ways of learning and teaching inter-cultural competence

The Council of Europe's work on languages has emphasised the importance of linguistic and cultural tolerance, and a number of ECML projects have examined how the challenging task of doing something practical in this area can be carried out. These have included the preparation of a very popular textbook (called "[Mirrors and Windows](#)") of inter-cultural communicative activities, a publication on how the use of anecdotes can help promote understanding among people of different cultures. There has also been more theoretical work on the definition of socio-linguistic competence, on how cultural mediation can function and on how developing effective communicative strategies can make communication between people of different backgrounds more effective. The "Mirrors and Windows" project, like a number of other projects in the first medium-term programme, is being continued in the second – so that the ECML's activities can have coherence and lasting effect.

Exploring innovative approaches to language teaching

Frequently the approach to learning a new language has been to begin from scratch as though learners have neither language learning knowledge nor experience. One of the projects of the first medium-term programme developed an approach in which the learning of a second foreign language – a "tertiary" language – can build on what has been acquired in the first foreign language. It used the example of [learning German after English](#) to develop a methodology with practical examples which can be applied in other contexts. Another project explored [innovations in the organisation of language education](#), with case studies on how, for example, the time allotted to language learning might be used more efficiently in short intensive periods rather than spread out throughout the year, and how various ways of distance learning could complement classroom learning. In the present programme there is a project on [CLIL – Content and Language Integrated Learning](#) – and how subject areas can be taught effectively in a foreign language.

Using new technologies in language teaching

How can [blogs](#) be used in language learning? Can Internet searches help task-based language learning in quests for information? These are among the topics being developed in on-going projects at the ECML. There have been more general approaches to the use of ICT in language education, and indeed many of the activities in projects not specifically based on technology exploit ICT possibilities to create networks, for interaction between project members in different countries.

Promoting quality in language education

All the ECML projects are in some way directed towards improving the quality of language education. A number of projects have been designed to address the question of quality management applied to the field, and a [CD-Rom](#) has been produced with a range of resources for promoting quality – both internally through self-assessment and through external quality audits. The ECML has also produced a series of practical guides to help organise language teaching effectively – for example, on [project management](#), on [organising conferences and seminars](#), on exploiting [twin city](#) arrangements for language learning.

How should we train the language teachers of the future?

The Common European Framework provides a competence-based approach to learning languages: one of the present projects is exploring the idea of a similar framework for language teacher training. Other projects are dealing with – or have dealt with – various aspects of teacher training: they include work on a practical guide for the skills like facilitation management and observation feedback that trainers need; on intercultural training for language teachers; on the need for a proper structure and conditions conducive to professionalism.

This brief account of the first ten years of the ECML has necessarily been selective, but it will have given a glimpse of the very substantial amount of work that has been done – for practical implementation of Council of Europe policies, for combining innovative ideas with practical application, for encouraging cooperation and giving value to language teaching and the work language teachers do.

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