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Europe's mother tongues are foreign tongues

Language acquisition as a key competence for the future of Europe • High-level conference in Graz discusses strategy and means of communication • Advanced understanding of communication skills as a goal for teaching

Multilingualism, quality and innovation in language education were the issues under the spotlight at the conference "Quality education and language competences for 21st century society: traditions, challenges, and visions" on 20-21 March in Graz (Austria).

In her opening remarks on 20 March, Snežana Samardžić-Marković emphasized the practical implications of multilingualism. The Council of Europe's Director General for Democracy referred to the crisis in Ukraine when she said: "What began as a question of language policy, developed into a geopolitical crisis that affects all of Europe." According to Samardžić-Marković it has become evident how closely connected national language policy and specifically the use of minority languages are with social cohesion, intercultural dialogue, participation and democracy. "Language can also be a source of misunderstanding. This is not what Europe needs today. Europe needs clarity, cooperation and an awareness of the central role that education and language for democracy and human rights play," said Samardžić-Marković. The 32 Member States of the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) invest in language education, an area of key political relevance for the entire continent.

The ECML plays a significant role in language education. Between 600 and 1000 experts directly benefit from the ECML's activities each year and convey the expertise gained, by acting as multipliers, in their home countries. Approximately 150 workshops and events are organized or co-funded by the ECML on an annual basis. The ECML thus acts as a platform whose added value stems from developing new ideas and implementing innovative projects.

The ECML was founded twenty years ago as an institution of the Council of Europe. The conference in Graz – initiated by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education and Women's Affairs (BMBWF) and organized by the European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe (ECML) – represented a significant contribution of Austria's current chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of Council of Europe. 150 experts and decision makers attended the conference in Graz, and a further 2,200 viewers from all over Europe followed the event via live stream.

Hanspeter Huber, Head of Section for International Affairs and Culture at the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education and Women's Affairs, took up the thread of Samardžić-Marković. Language teaching is "a particularly sensitive issue of national education policy." Multilingualism represents a core element of the education system, enabling mobility for students and professionals, supporting employability and with the potential to turn people into active, open-minded citizens.

Pierre Mairesse, Director General for Education and Culture of the European Commission focused his remarks on teaching practice. What are the new didactic concepts? How can new technologies be integrated into the classroom? According to Mairesse, language skills hold an importance well beyond the educational gains, as they are ultimately linked to the issue of employability.

Furthermore, Mairesse highlighted the successful cooperation between the Council of Europe and the European Union in the area of foreign language

teaching. With both organizations working in support of their member states, the pooling of resources in this area is a logical development.

Professor Henry Widdowson (London and Vienna University) in his keynote speech not only presented traditional concepts of language teaching but addressed the fundamental understanding of “foreignness”. The renowned linguist explained that, the traditional perception of the foreignness of a language is relative and is always seen in relation to the mother tongue. For example, the perception of foreignness is different when the language in question is a neighbouring language or the language of a distant country.. In addition, status, socio-cultural proximity, attitude and perception play a role. Widdowson pointed out that all these factors impact upon the motivation to learn a language. "Local perceptions of how a particular language is foreign, and how particular outsiders want or need to engage with it will, of course, determine what kind of ability is appropriate” said Widdowson. However, this ability is not necessarily represented through the widely used proficiency levels defined within the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

Currently, foreign language teaching is bi-, multi-or plurilingually aligned. The traditional goal is the accumulation of linguistic competence in one or more foreign language, with the ultimate goal being native speaker fluency. Widdowson criticized the perseverance of this tradition. "This level of competence is achieved by only a few learners. What thus is applied as an objective measure is, in my opinion, rather impressionistic and does not deal with what learners really need."

Thus, the future challenge lies in the question: What does the learner actually need? "A generalised, strategic ability to respond to unforeseen communicative needs. The linguistic repertoire and communicative potential should be expanded," said Widdowson. He defined his vision as the ability for "languaging" which ultimately should guide teaching objectives. However the implementation of this vision requires further research.

Peter Brown, a founding board member of EAQUALS, one of the institutions and organisations in the area of language education networking with the ECML, supported the critical comments of Widdowson on the CEFR in the subsequent discussion. "It is not necessary to completely replace the CEFR. But it is incomplete and should be extended and improved," said Brown. In contrast, Jutta Gehrig, director of the Goethe-Institut Budapest questioned whether Widdowson's vision of language learning could work in practice : "How much ability in different foreign languages can schools actually develop? "

Paula Mattila, the Finnish member of the ECML Governing Board, reported that as part of the on-going reform of the Finnish school curriculum one goal was to overcome "the principle of the native speaker." The new curriculum builds on "key competence development", i.e. the teaching of key skills: "Another novelty is the fact that the languages spoken at school and the linguistic repertoire of each child receive greater attention," added Mattila.

New forms of communication were also tested at the conference itself. Three short films developed specifically for the event provided talking points for rounds of discussions involving experts and contributions from the audience. The theme of "Learning spaces and learner autonomy" examined how architectural design and classroom layout can play a significant role both in reflecting contemporary educational concepts and in facilitating their practical application. "Using technology in the classroom" triggered a discussion on how smart phones can be used for foreign language acquisition and integrated into teaching. "Plurilingual education" offered experts the opportunity to discuss the difficulty of effectively translating the reality of linguistic diversity in Europe within national educational systems. "An important reason why there are these problems is the fact that the wider public is not clear about why plurilingual education is beneficial for all. At grassroot level people do not fully subscribe to this concept." analyzed Susanna Slivensky, Deputy Director and Head of Programmes at the ECML."

In opening the next day's proceedings Terry Lamb, President of FIPLV (Fédération Internationale des Professeurs de Langues Vivantes), summarised the views expressed the previous day and linked them to fundamental issue of quality in education. The day focused clearly on the needs of linguistic competence in the 21st century. In the voices of society panel discussion, representatives from business, regional authorities and youth and parents associations reported on their experiences. "Linguistic competence opens new worlds and today has a very different meaning than even 30 years ago," said Lea Renolder, representative of the European Youth Forum. Bernhard Posch, Head of the AVL (engineering) Academy, added that languages and basic communication skills are a key to success. One measure adopted by AVL is to include family members in the offer of German language courses to employees coming from abroad. Martina Grötschnig from the Styrian provincial government reported on the findings of the focus project "ZUSAMMENreden" for the design of a language-friendly environment: "Language diversity should be more widely recognized and made visible. Multilingualism is fun! "

The second panel on "development and promotion of linguistic competence in the 21st century" provided illustrations of the ECML as a partnership model. For Sjur Bergan, Head of the Education Department of the Directorate of Democratic Citizenship and Participation, education is more than the attainment of certain competence levels, but should be defined by the following goals: not only preparation for the labour market but preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies as well as the traditional goal of personal development. However, Bergan pointed out that it is not about choosing "between the goals as one goal should lead into the other."

Xavier North, General Delegate of the French language and languages of France in the French Ministry of Culture, praised the work of the ECML. Its courses and workshops were particularly relevant for language teachers, but

also for policy-makers: "The network approach of the ECML is a key feature, as this co-operation helps to implement values at national level."

The promotion of language-sensitive teaching represents an important aspect, according to Bernd Rüschoff, President of the Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée (AILA) . "Experience has shown that the learning of language is likely to work better if all teaching is considered as language teaching, and foreign languages are not taught separately."

The concluding speech provided a geographical bridge to the beginning of the conference: Mukhtar Mammadov, Head of Department of Foreign Studies and International Students at the Education Ministry of Azerbaijan, stated that in spite of the oil and natural gas resources of Azerbaijan "the largest investment in the future" of his country is in education.

Further information

At a glance: the [programme](#) |
Conference site and webcast: <http://www.ecml.at/conference>

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The **European Centre for Modern Languages** (ECML) was established in 1994 as an institution of the Council of Europe and is committed to the promotion of linguistic and cultural diversity. The 32 member states agree on thematic priorities for the Centre's programme on a four yearly basis. The current, 2012-2015, programme is dedicated to "Learning through languages: Promoting inclusive, plurilingual and intercultural education". The ECML is the only European institution which in close cooperation with over 30 education ministries works towards improving the quality and attractiveness of language learning. In 2013 a formal cooperation agreement with the European Commission was reached. The ECML is funded by the member states, with its seat provided by the host country Austria, through the BMBF, the province of Styria and the city of Graz.