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THE EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR MODERN LANGUAGES OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE (ECML): PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

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Lockdown, contact tracing and self-isolation are words that did not belong to the everyday vocabulary of learners and teachers at the beginning of 2020. By the end of the year 2020 they do. In this context of crisis how is the ECML supporting language teachers and learners? Which ideas are promoted by the ECML in order to prepare for sustainable 21st century learning environments in the post-Corona era?

ECML and innovation

Since it was founded in 1994, the Centre has focused its work on innovation, on promoting innovative, sustainable approaches in language education (Kettemann 2009). Innovation can be described as the capacity to manage change effectively (Heyworth 2003) and in the current health crisis, this capacity is the key to addressing the challenges at hand successfully.

The ECML's 25th anniversary publication "Changing contexts, evolving competences: 25 years of inspiring innovation in language education" (Cavalli et al. 2019) highlights nine thematic areas and related approaches which facilitate effective language teaching and learning: Teacher and learner competences, plurilingual and intercultural education, content and language integrated learning, curricula and evaluation, sign languages, languages of schooling, migrant education and employment, new media in language education and early language learning.

Bringing together expertise in order to bridge the gap between innovation and implementation is one of the objectives of the ECML's Professional Network Forum which unites 16 international professional institutions and associations, all committed to promoting quality in language education. ICC is a long standing and valued member of this group.

Responses to the crisis and evolving themes

The Corona crisis has changed ECML operations temporarily. The focus on face-to-face activities for experts at the Centre in Graz, Austria has shifted to fully online meetings. Initial feedback from project teams and participants indicates that they are satisfied – sometimes to their own surprise – with the project work over the distance. Yet there is a strong desire for a return to face-to-face meetings.

A very positive effect of this expansion of online activities can be observed with regard to the outreach of ECML activities. For example, in 2019 the ECML welcomed 1.693 participants to face-to-face meetings in Graz and in member states. In 2020 a single event set up in response to the crisis, the ECML webinar “Taking your teaching online”¹, brought together 2.800 participants online. In the four months since the webinar took place, 18.000 access views have been registered.

In times of Corona the ECML tries both to respond to current needs and to consider the longer term effects of this unprecedented crisis on language teaching and learning. Developing future plans starts with identifying evolving themes that are now even clearer than before the crisis. The following issues are of particular relevance:

- Empowering language professionals – with a focus on teachers and on innovative ways to reach them.
- Lobbying for a culture of innovation and for cooperative implementation: this means fostering environments where innovative ideas and approaches can be developed in professional communities across educational sectors and across different fields of expertise.
- Taking responsibility for the future: being aware of the role of quality language education for future generations, connecting language learning with sustainable development goals, 21st century skills or the EU’s strategy for a green and digital Europe.

Risky thinking

Taking risks triggers learning. Based on this assumption, a research group at the University of Ottawa developed an interesting linguistic risk-taking

¹ For ECML webinars see: <https://www.ecml.at/Resources/Webinars/tabid/5456/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>

initiative². The ECML has adopted the idea in the context of activities for the European Day of Languages (The Secret Agent's Language Challenges App³). Taking risks, risky thinking and thinking out of the box are vital aspects of language education during and after the crisis. Risky thinking can help cut across languages, cultures and subjects to meet the complex challenges of our future. The ECML will continue to be a partner for professionals who are open to risky thinking and inspiring innovation in language education in the post-Corona era.

References

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² University of Ottawa, Canadian Centre for Studies and Research on Bilingualism and Language Planning (CCERBAL), <https://ccerbal.uottawa.ca/linguistic-risk/>

³ <https://edl.ecml.at/Activities/Languagechallenge/tabid/3207/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>