The European Centre for Modern Languages

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ECML, Executive Director

"Basing its work on the underlying values of the Council of Europe and its pioneering work in language education, the ECML is ideally equipped to act as a catalyst for reform in the teaching and learning of languages." (at www.ecml.at/aboutus.asp?t=mission)

In the present article, Adrian Butler, the Executive Director of ECML, offers a comprehensive view of the institution whose "hallmark is the organisation of international language education projects".

It´s a shame Portugal has not joined the ECML yet!

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The European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) is an institution whose mission is to encourage excellence and innovation in language teaching in order to help Europeans learn languages more efficiently. Based on the underlying values of the Council of Europe and its pioneering work in cultural cooperation and language education, the ECML works with experts to assist its 33 member states[1] in implementing effective language teaching policies and bringing about change in the teaching and learning of languages.

The ECML was set up in Austria in 1995 as an Enlarged Partial Agreement of the Council of Europe. The Austrian authorities fund the infrastructure of the Centre and put at its disposal modern premises in Graz where the Secretariat is based and where the great majority of the ECML's events are held.

The context in which the ECML was set up

The origins of the ECML go back to the 1970s and 1980s and the Council of Europe's work on communicative language teaching, exemplified by the development of the Threshold Levels. But its birth was in fact prompted by the fall of the Berlin Wall, when the new democracies of central and eastern Europe joined in the Council of Europe's work.

The social, demographic, economic and political developments of the early 1990s pushed language issues to the forefront of national and international policy in the educational field. It became increasingly clear that expertise in language policy needed to be made available to decision makers. The Council of Europe's Modern Language Section (now the Language Policy Division) embarked on a succession of projects designed to co-ordinate international co-operation in support of member governments engaged in modernising language teaching. The programme concentrated on a schools interaction network and a series of workshops for teacher trainers.

Although these workshops were very successful, they were essentially "one-off events". The opinion grew, therefore, amongst member states that their continuing need for close support in the development of modern language provision to meet the requirements of an increasingly interactive European society would best be served by a permanent, dedicated centre.

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1 Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, "the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", United Kingdom.

In 1992, Austria, the Netherlands, Hungary, Poland and the then Czechoslovakia discussed the idea of a regional centre. Following a feasibility study, the Austrian government, as part of its policy of outreach towards the new Council of Europe member states, went further and offered both to host and part finance a European modern languages centre.

The formal act followed in April 1994 in the form of Committee of Ministers Resolution (94) 10 creating the "Enlarged Partial Agreement on the European Centre for Modern Languages".[2] Austria, France, Greece, Liechtenstein, Malta, the Netherlands, Slovenia and Switzerland were the initial signatories who took the decisive step in the founding of the ECML. The Resolution established the Centre for an initial trial period expiring on 31 December 1997.

Austria, which itself borders onto eight different countries, provided the perfect setting for a pan-European institution like the ECML and the city of Graz represented an inspired choice as seat of the Partial Agreement. To manage its infrastructure and promote visibility at national, regional and local level, the Austrian government set up the "Austrian Association for the ECML" (*Verein Europäisches Fremdsprachenzentrum in Österreich*).

The rapid increase in the number of members of the Partial Agreement (from 9 to 24 between 1995 and 1998) reflected growing interest in the work of the Centre, which was granted permanent status in July 1998 (Committee of Ministers' Resolution (98) 11). The launch of the European Year of Languages in 2001 provided impetus for further accessions to the Partial Agreement, which reached 33 members in 2002.

Aims and tasks of the Centre

The 1998 resolution describes the ECML's mission as:
- the implementation of language policies;
- the promotion of innovative approaches to the learning and teaching of modern languages.

and defines its strategic objectives as being to:

- focus on the practice of the learning and teaching of modern languages;
- promote dialogue and exchange among the various actors in the field;
- train multipliers;
- support programme related networks and research projects.

To achieve these objectives, the Centre has to "collect and disseminate examples of good practice in the field of modern language learning and teaching", "organise meetings (workshops, colloquies, etc.) between multipliers" and "focus on dissemination and follow up activities".

The Centre is thus a facility which offers its premises and services to experts conducting European projects involving, for particular activities, representatives of all member states. Participants of ECML activities are language specialists chosen by the National Nominating Authorities which have been set up by each of the Centre's members. These participants are expected to be able to disseminate what they gain from attending the Graz workshops amongst their colleagues and peers back home. The ECML's work is targeted essentially at teacher trainers, textbook authors and experts in the area of the development of curricula, educational standards, evaluation/assessment and certification.

2 A Council of Europe partial agreement is an administrative arrangement enabling those member states which wish to do so the possibility of joining and financing a political initiative within the Organisation's framework. An "enlarged" partial agreement is open to states which are not members of the Organisation.

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How the Centre works

The annual programmes of the early years were a mixture of training seminars and awareness-raising workshops and colloquies. As from 2000, the Centre's programmes adopted a four-year format consisting of medium-term projects aimed at developing, piloting and disseminating innovative methods and materials. These projects are designed to produce tangible results in the form of practical handbooks, guides and publications facilitating a wider-scale distribution, beyond the mere participants directly involved in the activities.

Through a call for proposals, internationally composed expert teams from the member states are invited to submit project proposals reflecting involvement in European developments as well as responding to national needs identified by the ECML member states.

The project format adopted by the Centre represents its particular approach to involving its 33 member states in its language education work. In a typical ECML project cycle, the international project team first meets at the Centre to launch a process of preparation and research (ie surveys, elaboration of pilot structures and materials). This developmental stage is followed by a workshop in Graz with nominated participants from all member states at which the key ideas of the project are presented. Following the workshop, participants may be involved in networks for piloting, testing and further development under the supervision of the team. Meetings of the networks are held to present their findings, which are then evaluated and collated by the team in a process that leads to the drafting of the final results. These are produced in the form of a publication or CD-Rom for presentation and dissemination, in certain cases through a second international workshop aimed at multipliers.

A characteristic feature of all ECML projects is the vision of an overall concept of language education, integrating all languages rather than focusing on the teaching and learning of individual languages. This approach has proved to be highly effective in creating synergies between different linguistic and educational cultures and communities. In addition, this working concept promotes plurilingualism by addressing overall features of language education responding to linguistic and cultural diversity.

"Languages for social cohesion": the 2004 – 2007 programme

The Centre's current programme (2004-2007) is entitled *Languages for social cohesion: language education in a plurilingual and pluricultural Europe*. It addresses the question of how best to equip people with the communicative and intercultural competences necessary to participate fully in our modern, compound societies as both individuals and citizens. It looks at how an integrated approach to language learning and teaching, based on a new educational role for language teachers, can assist in developing the communicative potential of individuals living in these societies.

The projects and activities in this programme contribute significantly to the dissemination and implementation of the political concepts promoted by the Council of Europe, notably democratic citizenship, social cohesion, mutual understanding and respect. Several projects also support wide and effective use of the instruments for enhancing the quality of language education developed by the Language Policy Division, in particular the *European Language Portfolio.*

The projects of the current programme are grouped around the following themes:

A. Coping with linguistic and social diversity

(projects related to migrant and minority languages, whole-school policies and other approaches to plurilingual education)

B. Communication in a multicultural society

(projects related to intercultural communication, intercultural competence, language awareness)

C. Professional development and reference tools

(projects related to teacher training in the use of the European Language Portfolio, applications of the CEFR)

D. Innovative approaches and new technologies

(projects related to IT applications (weblogs, online learning), early language learning, CLIL)

Full details on the individual projects are available on the ECML website:
http://www.ecml.at/mtp2/mtp2.asp

ECML services available to everybody

The Centre's extensive **website** (http://www.ecml.at/) is the central reference point for those requiring information on the Centre's work as well as a mine of useful material for language teachers and an invaluable communication platform for members of project teams. The site offers news about the ECML and details of the progress of all of its current projects, download-able copies of all of the Centre's publications as well as reports of past projects and other re-lated studies. Its interactive features include online databases and discussion forums. The Centre also hosts the website of the European Day of Languages.

Equally important in the Centre's work is the **Documentation and Resource Centre** – DRC (www.ecml.at/doccentre). The DRC is firstly a reference library specialising in language didac-tics. Its documentary collection, which can be consulted by the general public, includes resources connected to and resulting from ECML activities, reference works published by the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe and the *John Trim collection*, a unique collec-tion of material donated personally by Professor Trim to the ECML in 2004 covering his 35 years of involvement in the Council of Europe's modern languages projects.

The DRC also offers an information and documentation service, undertakes bibliographical research and is responsible for disseminating the results of the Centre's work. In the latter task, the DRC is assisted by **National Contact Points** set up by the 33 member states. These trans-mit information on the Centre, its work and its products via their existing national networks. For details of the Contact Points see: http://www.ecml.at/aboutus/members.asp

The DRC also edits the *European Language Gazette*, the ECML's online newsletter, which pro-vides up-to-date news about ECML events, projects and resources as well as developments in the Language Policy Division and other relevant sectors of the Council of Europe. The form for online subscription can be found on: www.ecml.at/news/

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"Empowering language professionals": the programme from 2008

The ECML is currently preparing its third medium-term programme (2008-2011), the title of which is *Empowering language professionals: Competences – Networks – Impact – Quality.*

The new programme takes place against the backdrop of major developments in the sphere of education involving both the Council of Europe and the European Union. These include the elaboration of a European Indicator of Language Competence, the action programme in the field of lifelong learning (2007-2013), the Lisbon strategy objectives in education and training and the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008).

The themes chosen for this programme are key elements in innovative language education. They represent areas where there is currently increasing demand on the professional skills of teachers who are expected to contribute to national education reform processes and face up to major challenges such as standard-linked tuition and result-oriented assessment, greater autonomy of educational institutions, increasing ethnic and cultural heterogeneity among students and promotion of lifelong or recurrent education.

The new programme will therefore address the four following thematic areas:
A. Evaluation
B. Continuity in language learning
C. Content and language education
D. Plurilingual education

The ECML is convinced that the key to the realisation of better language teaching and learning processes and results is to be found in increasing awareness of and confidence in the capacities of professionals in language education. The vision of empowerment highlighted in the programme's title will be pursued through four objectives:

- Enhancing the professional competence of language teachers;
- Strengthening professional networks and the wider community of language educators;
- Enabling language professionals to have greater impact on reform processes;
- Contributing to better quality of language education in Europe.

With this programme, the ECML intends to pursue its unique contribution to the language-teaching profession in Europe by enabling members of the profession to be more actively involved in defining and delivering higher standards of language education.

All language experts who are not able to be directly involved in the activities of the ECML's new programme may nevertheless contribute to its work to promote the empowerment of language professionals by:

- subscribing to the European Language Gazette for regular updates on the work of the ECML;
- consulting the ECML online catalogue with its user-friendly search functions;
- requesting ECML print publications to be sent to professional users;
- downloading any of the ECML publications;
- keeping in touch with developments in the projects of the new programme;
- contacting project teams to engage in professional discussions about the work of their projects.

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