

Cross-frontier connections: the modern languages project

The Council of Europe's project, "Language learning for European citizenship", is teaching national programmes to speak the same language.

The Council is running an ambitious programme in the language-learning field. Its aims are threefold: to safeguard Europe's linguistic heritage and cultural diversity, to facilitate mobility of people and ideas, and to devise joint approaches to the teaching of languages. Recently, an important part of this programme has been the "Language learning for European citizenship" project, which will be winding up at an intergovernmental conference in Strasbourg from 15 - 18 April 1997.

This project, covering all the languages of Europe, has two main emphases: the development of concepts and instruments for language policy, and activities designed to promote a coherent approach to language learning, based on common principles and involving various partners (learners, teachers, methodologists, textbook authors, examiners, etc.) By facilitating international co-operation in this area, the Council of Europe is supporting member states in their efforts to give language learning a new impetus.

Defining threshold levels

The first major stage in the project was to pinpoint aims by defining "threshold levels" – basic communication targets which have been, or are being, worked out for twenty-one national, regional and minority languages. In recent

years, the "threshold level" concept has radically transformed approaches to language-teaching, the prime aim of which is now seen as communication. Several multimedia courses have been produced under Council of Europe auspices – "Follow Me" and "Look Ahead" for English, "Viaje al Español" for Spanish and "Digui, Digui" for Catalan.

A pan-European instrument for language policies

The "Common European framework for language teaching and learning", which is now being prepared, will permit international comparison of aims and qualifications. It is designed to provide a clear and consistent picture of aims, methods and results within individual countries and across a range of different countries. It will help all those involved in language learning and teaching to pinpoint and co-ordinate their efforts and exchange information, and also to arrive at options and explain them. Developed in co-operation with the European Union, the framework will provide a unique pan-European instrument for the planning and implementation of language policies.

A feasibility study is also under way for a "European language portfolio". Essentially, this will do two things: motivate learners to

increase their language skills and serve as a record of the progress they make and the qualifications (diplomas, etc.) they acquire. Learners themselves will complete the portfolio, which offers them a wholly new kind of learning aid, allowing them to assess their skills in various languages with reference to the European framework. Prompting users to think about the learning process and providing a check on their progress, the portfolio will be valid for all the member states and will also serve as a kind of international language passport.

Towards a "European Language Year"?

The portfolio will be presented with the framework at the final conference in April, when it should be given the green light for field-testing, in pilot project form, before being introduced generally in 2001, which may be "European Language Year".

In practical terms, the "Language learning for European citizenship" project has already generated a series of international workshops, mainly for people who can pass the message on in member states: education ministry officials, inspectors, teachers and teacher trainers, textbook authors, etc. These workshops (see opposite) help states to implement their language teaching priorities.

A special effort for Central and Eastern European countries

A special effort has been made to help the new member states in Central and Eastern Europe, which are having to reform their curricula at top speed. The language co-operation networks are also being extended in the West, particularly in connection with bilingual education, which is more developed in the East.

The Modern Languages Section is active on language policies too, and the Directorate of Education, Culture and Sport is working with the Directorate of Political Affairs on language legislation in multilingual countries, among other questions. In Latvia and Estonia, a programme is being run with the European Union to integrate communities of foreign origin, most of them Russian-speaking. This programme has the backing of experts on language policy and on assessment of the Estonian and Latvian language skills of people wanting to acquire those nationalities.

The final conference in Strasbourg next April should come up with recommendations advocating a carefully-planned language policy, based on the results of the current project and taking account of the European reference framework and the European language portfolio. A new project, carrying on from the present one, should be launched for the period 1997-2000. This will include implementation of these new instruments, and will be run in co-operation with the European Centre for Modern Languages

in Graz and the European Union, among other partners.

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"New-style" workshops

Practical fall-out from the Council of Europe's project, "Language learning for democratic citizenship", includes a series of discussion and study workshops, as well as action programmes. The workshops have covered various aspects of language teaching: early teaching in primary school, teaching at secondary level, vocational language courses and adult education (advanced level). The priority themes pinpointed by the Council for Cultural Co-operation (CDCC) of the Council of Europe have been tackled: specification of learning aims; use of the media and the new technologies; bilingual education; the role of educational links, visits and exchanges in language learning and teaching; approaches to making learners independent; evaluation; the basic and further training of teachers.

Thanks to support from member states, which host the meetings, thirty-one workshops, attended by a total of nearly 3 000 "multipliers", have been organised since the project started. Each has been jointly run by two host countries, and a new working method has been used for them. A first workshop (workshop A) identifies national and international problems relating to the selected theme and sector. A research and development phase, lasting some two years, then follows. During this phase, projects are carried out by a network of educationists in the participating countries. Finally, a second workshop (workshop B) takes stock of the results, with a view to publicising them, and draws up recommendations, when appropriate. Ongoing personal contacts are part and parcel of this whole approach, and this makes it easier to secure "democratic consensus" of the participants.

The workshops also provide teacher training materials and give rise to specific reports. Some of them have already been summarised or discussed in the April and October issues of *Language Teaching*, the international review published by the Cambridge University Press. Their conclusions will be embodied in a series of thematic publications, some of which will be ready for the final conference in Strasbourg.

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Contents

	Page
Editorial	1
The Shoah: teaching the unspeakable	2
Bosnia - the way back	3
School exchanges – key to contact	4
Bringing young Europeans together - the "Europe at School" competition	5
Cross-frontier connections: the modern languages project	6
Modern languages «New-style» workshops	7
Higher education - giving everyone a chance	8
Human rights: respecting diversity	9
Civic education – the new priorities	10
Parliamentary Assembly: backing education and young people as part of the Middle East peace process	11
In brief	11
Education diary	12
Publications	12

Editorial

The theme of this number of the Newsletter is our work on the European dimension of education, in particular modern languages, civic education, history, school links and exchanges, and the Europe at School Activity.

In the past few years, there has been a sea-change in thinking about the European dimension of education. For a long time, it was seen as a simple "education for reconciliation and better understanding". It had little official recognition, and it interested only a few idealists and pioneers.

Today its importance is fully recognised by Ministries of Education and the European Institutions. It is a dynamic evolving concept which is concerned with the preparation of our young people for life in a democratic, multilingual, multicultural and increasingly complex Europe. The European dimension of education has significant implications not only for the content of curricula but also for school organisation, school-leaving examinations, guidance, extra-curricular activities, inter-university co-operation, the mobility of students and academics, and the sharing of educational research.

The importance of the European dimension for education policies is illustrated by the fact that the Council of Europe's Standing Conference of the European Ministers of Education chose it as the main theme of one of its recent sessions.

Work, study and leisure in Europe, the Ministers pointed out, are increasingly characterised by mobility, interchange and communication. European contacts, partnerships and co-operation are now an integral part of the daily lives of governments, business people, trade unionists, professional groups and private citizens.

The Ministers recommended that, in these circumstances, education should:

- increase awareness of the growing unity between the countries and peoples of Europe and of the establishment of their relations on a new basis;
- foster understanding of the fact that, in many spheres of our lives, the European perspective applies and European decisions are necessary.

On the other hand, young people should not lose sight of their national, regional and local roots or of their global responsibilities. Schemes to develop the European dimension of education should not, in turn, promote selfish, inward-looking or Eurocentric attitudes. As the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe has recommended, education systems should encourage young Europeans to "see themselves as citizens not only of their own region and country but also as citizens of Europe and of the wider world".

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