

# European policy developments in languages

**ALAN DOBSON** is well known in the education world as the former senior HMI for Languages. More recently, his support for language learning has been expressed through his membership of the Governing Board of the European Centre for Modern Languages and as the UK representative on the recently established EU working group. He is therefore well-placed to report on some of the latest languages developments at European level.



## Two organisations

The Council of Europe (CoE) is the oldest and, with its 45 member states, the largest European organisation. Its aims in the languages field reflect the values of the wider organisation, such as the deepening of mutual understanding among European citizens; respect for linguistic and cultural diversity; language learning as a lifelong process; the development of the individual language learner; the clear description of qualifications to promote mobility. It has had a significant impact on teaching and learning from the threshold level in the 1970s to the development of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* and the *European Language Portfolio* in the 1990s<sup>1</sup>.

The European Union (EU) shares many of the aspirations of the CoE: '... it is a Union ... founded on mutual acceptance of peoples with different histories but a common future. Building a common home in which to live in harmony while maintaining the individuality and diversity of each means acquiring the skills to communicate with one another effectively and to understand one another better'<sup>2</sup>. It, too, has had a significant impact on the world of languages, not least through its Socrates and Leonardo programmes.

The two organisations complement each other and this trend is likely to increase as more CoE member states take up membership of the EU. Both organisations are developing new policies to meet the challenges of diversity and mobility.

## Council of Europe

The CoE is continuing to build on its work on the Common European Framework (CEF), for example through identifying means of establishing reliable assessment and moderation of the six-level scale across languages and across Europe. A *Guide for the development of*

*language education policies in Europe* is being developed to complement the CEF. Whereas the CEF is aimed primarily at teachers and learners, the Guide is intended to assist policy makers in analysing the complex policy issues posed in linguistically and culturally diverse societies.

Some 40 versions of the *European Language Portfolio* from a wide range of countries have now been validated: these cover all phases from early language learning to adult education and universities. CILT has had a significant influence on this work and has produced its own portfolios (see p3).

The CoE is launching a series of national 'policy profiles'. These involve a group of experts working alongside a team from the host country to provide an objective look from outside at its policies for language education. The process also offers a means of pooling experience to raise awareness of issues, strategies for dealing with them, and good practice across Europe.

## European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML)

The ECML is a CoE institution based in Graz (Austria); the UK became its thirty-second member in 2002.<sup>3</sup> The first medium-term programme (2000/3) will culminate in a conference in October, to be followed by a series of publications. The programme has covered a number of themes relevant to the United Kingdom, including: language awareness; intercultural learning; ongoing assessment in secondary education; the uses of ICT.

The title of ECML's second medium-term programme (2004/7) is 'Language education for social cohesion in a multilingual and multicultural Europe'. Proposals for transnational projects are being considered this autumn. The UK has been fully involved in shaping this programme through CILT UK in which all four countries of the UK are represented.

## European Union

The Barcelona European Council (March 2002) called for action aimed at improving 'the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age', including through the 'establishment of a linguistic competence indicator'. For most member states the 'mother tongue plus two' proposal is likely to be a long-term objective.

A working group with members from each of the fifteen member states and the ten accession countries is considering the feasibility of an indicator to measure the linguistic competence of young people at the end of compulsory education across the four skills. The indicator is to be based on the CEF scale.

The group has also been evaluating examples of good practice put forward by member states. The examples have been grouped into five areas: early language learning; language learning in secondary education; linguistic diversity; lifelong language learning; and teacher training. Particular thought is being given to the extent to which good practice is transferable from one context or country to another.

The group's conclusions will form the basis of an action plan on language learning and linguistic diversity. They will also contribute to advising the European Commission on the nature of successor programmes for Socrates and Leonardo.

## Notes

- 1 Council of Europe/Cambridge University Press, 2001. A useful reference source on the CoE, including the CEF and ELP, is: Byram, M. (ed.) *Routledge encyclopedia of language teaching and learning*. Routledge.
- 2 Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity – Consultation, Brussels, November 2002.
- 3 The ECML is a CoE institution set up under an 'Enlarged Partial Agreement' which means that CoE member states are not automatically members but may apply to join. The ECML focuses on the implementation of language policies whereas their development is the responsibility of the CoE's Language Policy Division in Strasbourg.