

Collaboration and dissemination: innovations on a European level

Note from the president

Background

In September of this year, I was invited by the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) in Graz, Austria's second city, to attend their conference entitled *Languages education in a multilingual and multicultural Europe*. The



purpose of the conference was to share, and celebrate, the results of three years of ECML project activity, under the umbrella of the second medium-term programme, and also to look forward to the new programme for the next three years. My role was to participate in a panel session at the end of the three days of presentations and workshops, with a view to reflecting on the whole

programme from an FIPLV perspective, gleaned from my attendance at some sessions and from reading about the projects and discussing them with project participants. I then promised to write a brief article for the conference proceedings.

The conference was an enormous success, and it also gave me the opportunity to meet many colleagues from around Europe who are actively involved in FIPLV member associations. I also appreciated the chance to spend time with colleagues from ECML, in particular Susanna Slivensky, and to explore ways in which FIPLV and ECML might collaborate more closely, given that we now share the same address and, to a large extent, the same aims.

My article for this World News is based on my reflections on the issues and priorities of the whole range of ECML projects, and to consider implications for future work. As I wrote the article for the ECML, it occurred to me that the themes I was addressing are so closely related to FIPLV themes, and to my own commitments, that it would be valuable to share them with our members around the world. I am therefore grateful to ECML for allowing me to publish this here.

Valuing languages

According to its mission statement, the Fédération Internationale des Professeurs de Langues Vivantes (FIPLV) exists for the worldwide support, development and promotion of languages through professional associations. Central to its work is a commitment to multilingualism and to finding ways of supporting collaborative endeavours to achieve an environment in which plurilingualism can flourish.

For this reason, the first session I chose to attend was a report from the VALEUR (Valuing *all* languages in Europe) project coordinated by two of my British colleagues, Joanna McPake and Teresa Tinsley. What was interesting about this project was that it highlighted just how far we have come towards appreciating the multilingual nature of our continent. The recognition of linguistic diversity as an asset to society, and the inclusion within this diversity of all languages in use in society (and not just the official, regional or national languages of European countries), offers an inspiring vision for our changing world. It also brings with it the challenge for those involved in education, especially policymakers and teachers, to find new and appropriate ways of building on this diversity in inclusive ways, enabling everyone to enjoy (rather than simply tolerate) the languages they see and hear around them.

The findings of this project indicate that the extent of linguistic diversity is far greater in the countries which make up the Council of Europe than earlier surveys suggested, with at least 440 spoken and at least 18 sign languages in use, in addition to the dominant languages (McPake and Tinsley 2007: 26). It also makes a significant contribution to the development of policy and practice through its description of 'good practice' case studies, such as those which show children learning the languages of their neighbours as well as the more traditional languages taught in schools. I was particularly struck by the photograph of some young girls from Afro-Caribbean backgrounds learning Urdu alongside some young girls from Asian backgrounds. It sends a strong message that all languages are there for everyone to share and enjoy.

The implication for language teachers is that they are not just (for example) French, German or Spanish teachers. More importantly, they need to consider the ways in which they can prepare their learners to be open to learning *any* language at any point in their lives. They also need to embrace the development amongst their learners, but also in themselves, of intercultural competences such as those explored in many of the ECML projects, e.g. the ICOPROMO project aimed at supporting those who are professionally mobile to develop the skills and competences which will enable them to thrive in another country. This places new demands on teachers, and they need support through focused teacher development activities along the lines of the LEA (Language educator awareness) project and the ELP_TT project, which supports teachers in using the tool of the European Language Portfolio as a way of validating a range of language competence gained in a range of settings.

Innovation

Such a changing world necessitates new thinking in educational structures and pedagogies. Flexibility is a key concept, and curricular models and teaching methodologies need to respond to this. People are learning languages for a broad range of purposes, both within and beyond educational institutions. Formal classroom teaching is being supplemented by innovatory practice exploiting not only the potential of new technologies, such as self-access and distance learning, but also community-based learning, such as complementary education, family learning and tandem learning. Weekly drip-feed approaches to language learning are being complemented by short, intensive periods of study in summer schools and exchange programmes. The ECML projects on 'innovative approaches' document developments which are useful models for encouraging teachers to think creatively. Ways of supporting learners in these new learning contexts must continue to be explored; for example, learners increasingly need to be autonomous learners, and this brings with it a new role for the teacher in developing in their learners the necessary knowledge, skills and strategies which will enable them to learn effectively in these new learning contexts (Jiménez Raya, Lamb and Vieira 2007; Lamb and Reinders 2005).

An important lesson to be learnt from the European projects is the significance of contextual appropriateness. It is unlikely that any policy, curriculum or innovatory practice can be replicated in another context, given the profile of conditions and constraints which are unique to every setting. This places another demand on us when we wish to learn from developments reported in the ECML projects, namely to reflect critically on what is needed to support successful interventions. In other words, we need to synthesise the significant patterns and theories across the projects to identify that which is possible, and to gain insights into ways of overcoming constraints. We can then be empowered professionally, and motivated to try out new ways of working.

Collaboration and dissemination

Empowerment is a theme adopted by the ECML for its third programme of activity which will last for the next three years. A fundamental aspect of empowerment is collaboration, since the opportunity to learn with and from others opens up new possibilities to teachers and policymakers, and the ECML projects, both in their development and their dissemination, offer valuable opportunities for this. A further benefit of collaboration is that it enables teachers of all languages to explore together their common values and pedagogic models, helping to overcome the threat of competition between teachers of different languages. FIPLV, working together with the ECML, is well-placed to facilitate such collaboration through its network of international unilingual and national multilingual teacher associations. In doing so, we hope to support the ECML in widening the impact of its projects both within and beyond Europe.

In November I shall be returning to Graz to discuss a formal agreement between FIPLV and ECML which will enable us to develop this partnership in concrete ways. We hope to be able to bring FIPLV member associations in Europe together in order to learn more about these projects, and to consider ways in which we might bring the fruits of this excellent work to a wider audience, namely the teachers who make up the membership of our federation. I will keep you all informed of developments so that associations around the globe can also benefit from these projects and the materials which they have produced.

References

Information on the ECML projects can be found on the ECML website: <http://www.ecml.at>.

Jiménez Raya, M., Lamb, T.E. and Vieira, F. (2007) *Pedagogy for Autonomy in Language Education in Europe: Towards a Framework for Learner and Teacher Development*. Dublin: Authentik.

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