

# Modern Language Learning in the New Europe

## *The European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz*

*Austria and the Netherlands were responsible for a joint initiative which led to the establishment of the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz in the fall of 1994; an institution conceived to promote the teaching and learning of modern languages in a multinational Europe that has been established by the Council of Europe. It started operating in the spring of 1995.*

Learning foreign languages is one of the primary vehicles for an appreciation and understanding of other cultures, countries, and people. Language instruction ultimately has political consequences. Regardless of age, it enhances students' understanding of other cultures, countries, and people and provides them with new media of communication. It affirms the importance of differences. Language instruction contributes directly to the cultivation of diversity in a multilingual and multicultural Europe and, at the same time, promotes the tolerance and pluralism characteristic of democratic societies.

### **A Pan-European Forum**

The purpose of the Graz Centre is to promote the teaching and learning of languages on a pan-European scale and at all levels: from primary schools to universities. It has been conceived as a forum for the promotion of modern languages for all professionals involved in language instruction and education: policy-makers, specialists in didactics, teacher trainers, textbook authors, and other "multipliers" in language education.

Although the Graz Centre plans on paying special attention to the critical needs of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe during its initial stage of operation, it is interested in responding to the diverse needs of the entire European language teaching community. The main institutional vehicle of the

Graz Centre is the organisation of international workshops or seminars and the publication and dissemination of their results.

The European Centre for Modern Languages was established in the form of the Council of Europe "Enlarged Partial Agreement of the Graz Centre." Through this "Enlarged Partial Agreement," the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers authorised a group of Council of Europe member states to carry out specific activities among themselves, provided they assume the financial responsibility for such activities.

Eight of the Council of Europe's thirty-six member states assumed the initiative for establishing the Graz Centre and funding its activities for an initial three year period: Austria, France, Greece, Liechtenstein, Malta, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Switzerland. Since then, they have been joined by another eight states - Norway, Croatia, Estonia, Luxembourg, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Hungary, and the Slovak



*Cutting the blue ribbon at the official opening of the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz on May 5, 1995 (l. to r.): Alfred Stingl, Mayor of Graz; Elisabeth Gehler, Austrian Federal Minister for Education and Cultural Affairs; Peter Leuprecht, Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe.*

Republic - and other countries have stated their intention to accede to the "Enlarged Partial Agreement" in the near future.

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## Governance and Administration

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Representatives from each of these sixteen states serve as members of the Graz Governing Board which is responsible for establishing policy guidelines as well as evaluating the Centre's activities. The management of the Centre is carried out locally by a team of five professionals who belong to the Secretariat of the Council of Europe. Mr. Claude Kieffer recently assumed his responsibilities as Executive Director of the Centre, and Ms. Teresa Reinhardt is serving as Deputy Executive Director.

Contributions by the sixteen countries that have signed the "Enlarged Partial Agreement" and the Council of Europe account for approximately one-half of the Graz Centre's operating budget, and funding by the Republic of Austria, the province of Styria, and the City of Graz covers the other half.

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## Preschoolers, Postdocs, Networks

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The mission of the Graz Centre is to promote the dissemination of good practice in language teaching and learning, and its activities cover all levels of education from preschoolers to post-docs. Correspondingly, it is open to all European institutional and organisational constituencies concerned with the learning and teaching of modern languages.

The Centre also views the generation of networks based on topical or professional interests as one of its foremost goals. A number of networks have been established as a direct result of its initial 1995 workshops which, in turn, covered a wide variety of topics, such as, "Training teachers for multicultural Europe," "Setting up teacher associations: their function and possibilities in language policy and curriculum development," "Understanding teacher development (for primary schools, age 6-10)," "Learning objectives and final testing of competences in languages at the end of secondary school," or "Goals and contents of language teaching at universities."

Individuals or institutions as well as governmental and non-governmental agencies and organisations wishing to suggest topics for activities at the Graz Centre should contact the Executive Director concerning the modalities for submitting workshop proposals. The Graz Centre's Programme of Activities is adopted annually at the end of the calendar year by the Centre's Bureau of the Governing Board.

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## Participating in Activities

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The workshops, seminars, and other activities organised at the Graz Centre are open to participants with relevant professional experience and interests from all member states of the Council of Europe. Participants are recruited and nominated to participate in the Centre's activities by the appropriate educational authorities in the member states.

At a "typical" meeting at the Graz Centre, you meet one language professional or expert from each of the sixteen states that have signed the "Enlarged Partial Agreement" and one participant from each of the new partner countries from Central and Eastern Europe. Remaining places for individual activities are available to qualified individuals from other Council of Europe member states on a "first come, first serve" basis.

The European Centre for Modern Languages has its own "house" in a residential district of Graz, close to Karl-Franzens University, Austria's second largest university. In addition to offices and a documentation centre, it has three meeting rooms, one of which is fully equipped for simultaneous translation.

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