

A brief overview of language education programmes at the Council of Europe

European co-operation in language learning and teaching has been to the forefront of the Council of Europe's work in education for almost 50 years. Early programmes of international co-operation focused on the development of communication and intercultural skills for the mobility of persons and ideas, and on the promotion of the European heritage of cultural and linguistic diversity. Subsequent projects carried out by the Language Policy Division in Strasbourg addressed the social and political dimensions of language learning, promoting diversification in language learning, quality, coherence and transparency in language provision, and the language education rights of minorities. The



European Year of Languages (2001), organised with the European Union, led to further initiatives to support

member states in developing policy responses to the new challenges to social cohesion and integration. The

Year saw the launch of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* and the *European Language Portfolio*, and the dynamic generated by the Year was followed up by the declaration of the *European Day of Languages* on 26 September as an annual event.

Currently the Division is focusing on developing an integrated, cross-disciplinary approach to plurilingual and intercultural education that encompasses all the languages and language varieties and cultures present in school. This implies bringing the different language disciplines into a coherent relationship and also seeking links between language learning and other school subjects. The language of schooling is central to this process as it is transversally linked to learning all subjects. Equal access to education and the full curriculum is highly dependent on language proficiency, and consequently the right to quality education depends on mastery of the language of schooling. The Division is developing a platform of resources and references that will include, among others, explicit descriptors for the language competences expected not only in language as a subject but equally concerning the language skills required in other school subjects (see also article page 17).

A new impetus was given to international co-operation projects by the setting up in 1995 of the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) in Graz. The Centre, which is an Enlarged Partial Agreement of the Council of Europe, assists its member states (currently 34) in implementing effective language-teaching policies and bringing about change in the teaching and learning of languages. The Centre organises projects and supports networks involving key multipliers such as

teacher trainers, textbook authors and experts in curriculum development. Projects typically last 3-4 years with a research and development focus and international workshops to review and finalise results for dissemination to the language education profession.

The ECML's recent medium-term programmes have focused on language learning for social cohesion in a multilingual and multicultural Europe and on developing the competences of language educators. The current programme (2008-2011), 'Empowering language professionals', has 20 projects covering four thematic areas: evaluation, continuity in language learning, content and language education, and plurilingual education. A particularly effective example, among others, of how the ECML is enhancing the professional competence of language teachers is the development and dissemination of a *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages*. The widespread use of this very practical European reference tool, available in a number of languages, illustrates clearly the impact that the ECML is having on teacher education and quality assurance in language education (see also article page 19).

The Council of Europe's work to promote linguistic and cultural diversity and respect for that diversity as expressed in regional or minority cultures is most evident in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which was opened for signature in 1992 and entered into force in 1998.

This Convention, which today has been ratified by 24 member states, is designed to protect and promote Europe's linguistic heritage as a cultural asset. States Parties commit to an active policy of support for the use of regional and minority

languages in all aspects of daily life. The Charter, which is the only international legally binding instrument of its kind, includes objectives and common principles for all states and all languages, as well as concrete specific undertakings which may vary from country to country and language to language.

Contracting states participate in a continuous monitoring process (every three years) in their application of the obligations they have assumed under the Charter. This process has led to changes in national policies and domestic legislation concerning regional or minority languages.

The ultimate challenge, as always, continues to lie in the practical implementation of agreed measures, including in the field of education. The measures contained in the Charter, which can be applied according to the situation of each language, are designed to ensure that speakers can send their children to a school that provides education entirely in their own language, or at least teaches their languages as a subject, at all levels from pre-school to higher education.

The state is obliged to provide this education and to ensure the necessary support, including learning materials and properly trained teachers. The implementation of the Charter is to be undertaken without prejudice to the teaching of the official language(s) of the state, making it an ideal instrument to support states in realising the benefits of good quality bilingual education, which is a well-established and widely-used approach in multilingual communities (see also article page 16).

To summarise, the Council of Europe addresses the right to education within a broad vision of plurilingual

and intercultural education (see also article page 11) that focuses not only on essential language competences but equally on fundamental values. Language is viewed not merely as a tool to be mastered for communication purposes but equally as a transversal instrument for learning. This

means taking fully into account the unique contribution of language education to personal development, socialisation, identity building the promotion of democratic citizenship, social inclusion, mutual understanding, and acceptance of and respect for diversity.



Contact:
Joseph Sheils
joseph.sheils@coe.int



Education Newsletter



Editorial

A diamond is a mysterious thing. When first found, its splendour may not be apparent; only the experienced eye can detect its potential and see what it might become with patience and skill. Yet once cut it is beautiful and radiant, symbolising purity and eternity. A diamond also traditionally represents an anniversary of sixty years.

For sixty years the Council of Europe has promoted and defended human rights, democracy and the rule of law, and this remains its priority objective. But these rights and values do not exist in a vacuum and the recognition of their fundamental importance and meaning should not be taken for granted. They are goals that have to be understood and achieved by every new generation if Europe is to remain united. Such unity depends to a large extent on the ability of our societies to engage in intercultural dialogue and acknowledge the intrinsic value of education as a human right and a powerful contribution to social cohesion and inclusion.

Accordingly, the aim of the Education Directorate for the years to come is to develop this vision of the unifying role of education. The coherence of the Council of Europe's work in the educational field and the continuity of its effort have meant that it has not had to recreate itself in order to respond to the various post-war situations that have arisen. It is this philosophical consistency that has enabled the Organisation to respond to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the threat of terrorism. The cement that binds its actions is the strong belief that citizens and groups have duties and responsibilities to one another, that there is a moral dimension to environmental issues and economic crises, and that the key to a peaceful future lies in every individual's access to quality education that enables and stimulates personal development, identity building, critical thinking and the discovery of other values and attitudes, whether born in faith or in culture.

