
**European Day of Languages -
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at the premises of the European Centre for Modern
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**The Work of the Council of Europe
in the field of Modern Languages,
1957 – 2001**

by John Trim

The Council of Europe has been active in the promotion of modern language learning and teaching since the signature of the European Cultural Convention in December, 1954. As an intergovernmental organisation, its role has been to:

- assist member states in taking effective measures which will enable all present and future citizens to:
 - achieve a degree of communicative competence in a number of languages (plurilingualism) on a lifelong basis, in the interests of better personal mobility, improved opportunities for education and employment and access to information in a multilingual and multicultural Europe
 - develop the independence of judgment, thought and action combined with social responsibility necessary for the exercise of democratic citizenship
 - promote intercultural understanding and international co-operation
- protect and develop the European heritage of cultural and linguistic diversity as a source of mutual enrichment (European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages; Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities)
- help to implement reforms in progress and encourage innovation in language teaching and teacher training
- facilitate the pooling of international experience and expertise in order to promote a coherent, learner-centred methodology, integrating aims, content, teaching, learning and assessment in a harmonious approach based on common principles.

1. The starting point 1954

Article 2 of the European Cultural Convention calls on its signatories to:

- a) encourage the study by its own nationals of the language, history and civilisation of the other Contracting Parties and grant facilities to those Parties to promote such studies in its territory, and
- b) endeavour to promote the study of its language or languages, history and civilisation in the territory of the other Contracting Parties and grant facilities to the nationals of those Parties to pursue such studies in its territory.

2. First steps. 1957-1962

The first initiative came in 1957, when at the suggestion of the French Government, a Committee of Experts was set up to plan the development of Modern Language teaching in Europe. The first Intergovernmental Symposium was held in Paris to launch *le Français fondamental*, a specification of a basic vocabulary and grammar for the French language, and *Voix et images de la France*, a pioneering audio-visual course for adults learning French, also developed by the Centre de Recherche et Diffusion du Français (CREDIF). The French also pressed for the institution of a European Institute

of Applied Linguistics on the American model, but the proposal was not accepted. Instead, the Council for Cultural Co-operation set up a Major Project in the field.

3. Major Project in Modern Languages 1963-1972

This project involved all the educational committees of the Council for Cultural Co-operation. It held a series of Symposia (*Stages*) to promote:

- co-operation among the successive sectors of the educational system, and among corresponding sectors in different European countries
- interaction between university language research and the language teaching profession; the establishment of applied linguistics as a recognised academic discipline and the institution of an International Association for Applied Linguistics (AILA). The Council gave support to the first Congresses of the Association in Nancy (1964) and Cambridge (1969)
- the development and use of audio-visual technology and methodology in language teaching.

4. Unit-credit scheme 1971 – 1977.

Following a Symposium on Languages in Adult Education in Rüslikon, CH, in 1971, the Committee for Out-of-School Education set up a small working group to examine the feasibility of a European unit-credit scheme for language in adult education. The working group first laid down the basic principles on which subsequent work has been based (Trim (ed.) 1990)

- languages are for all
- languages are learnt for use
- language learning is a life-long activity
- language teaching should specify worthwhile, appropriate and realistic objectives based on a proper assessment of the needs, characteristics and resources of learners
- language teaching should be planned as a coherent whole, covering the specification of objectives, the use of teaching methods and materials, the assessment of learner achievement and the effectiveness of the system, providing feedback to all concerned
- effective language teaching involves the co-ordinated efforts of educational administrators and planners, textbook and materials producers, testers and examiners, school inspectors, teacher trainers, teachers and learners, who need to share the same aims, objectives and criteria of assessment.

A 'functional-notional' model for specifying objectives was developed, which first set out the categories and language exponents of 1) functions performed by acts of speech in communication (e.g. explaining, questioning, apologising, offering, congratulating, etc.); 2) general concepts (e.g. place, time, causality, etc.); 3) concrete, situation-specific concepts followed in end case by (e.g. house, train, score, grill, etc.). The model was exemplified in respect of English in *The Threshold Level* (van Ek, 1975), which specified what a learner of a particular language needed to do and say in order to make their way about as independently in the foreign language environment.

A draft plan for a unit-credit scheme was prepared (Trim (ed.) 1986).

5. Project 4 1977-81: *Modern Languages*

In this project the principles developed by the unit-credit group were applied in projects across the different sectors of general secondary, vocational and adult education, as well as in migrant education. A major Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to Member Governments, R(82)18, was prepared. Versions of the Threshold Level were developed for further languages, and an intermediate objective *Waystage* (van Ek and Alexander 1977) was developed as the objective for the hugely successful Anglo-German multi-media production *Follow Me*, subsequently followed on TV by over 500 million viewers worldwide. A full report on the work of the Council *Modern Languages 1971 – 81* was published.

6. Project 12 1981–1988: *Learning and Teaching Modern Languages for Communication*

This project was devoted to supporting member governments in the implementation of R(82)18 in programmes of reform for modern languages across all member states. A schools-interaction network already set up in Project 4 was extended, playing a major role in sharing experience and expertise between countries. In bringing new methods to the classroom, teacher trainers were seen as the key agents in the field. A series of 36 international workshops was held 1984 – 87, in which 226 animators worked with some 1500 participants on the many aspects of the 'communicative approach' to language teaching and their incorporation into programmes of initial and in-service teacher training. This programme reached the classroom through many channels and was largely instrumental in achieving a broad consensus on the aims and methods of language teaching across member states and in fact much more widely.

7. 1989-1997 *Language learning for European citizenship*

This period was marked by:

- a rapid expansion in the membership of the Council for Cultural Co-operation following the political changes in Central and Eastern Europe around 1990. R(82)18 provided important guidelines for the reform and re-orientation of language teaching in those new member states, as did participation in the principal project activity

- a series of 18 ‘new-style’ workshops. In 1989, member states agreed a set of issues on which it would be useful to organise programmes of research and development. These were:
 - an enriched model for specifying objectives
 - making use of mass media and new technologies
 - bilingual education
 - the role of educational links, visits and exchanges
 - learning to learn and the promotion of learner autonomy.

Pairs of governments agreed to offer: 1) a co-ordinating international workshop to set out the issue and agree a plan of work; 2) a co-ordinator to oversee the workings of teams working in different countries over a two-year period; 3) a second workshop at the end of the period to receive and summarise findings and make recommendations for language policy.

8. A Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching , assessment

An Intergovernmental Symposium in 1991 agreed to the Swiss Government’s suggestion that the mutual recognition of qualifications and communication concerning objectives and achievement standards would be facilitated if they were calibrated according to agreed common reference standards, purely descriptive in nature. Following several years’ work by an authoring team and two revisions following consultation and field trialling, the Framework has been published in English (Cambridge University Press), French (Hachette) and German (Langenscheidt). Versions for the 4 official languages of Spain are in an advanced stage of preparation. The Framework consists of a descriptive scheme setting out an analysis of language use and of the many ‘competences’, i.e. the shared knowledge and skills, which enable users of a language to communicate with each other. Wherever possible, these are separately calibrated with brief descriptors defining six levels of proficiency. Overall progress is also calibrated in this way. The Framework does not set out to prescribe standards, but provides a basis for all involved in the teaching/learning process to reflect, plan and communicate their decisions on objectives, methods and achievements transparently and in compatible terms.

9. The European Language Portfolio

The second tool to be offered is the European Language Portfolio. This is a document which is personal to its holders and allows them to record and display the full range of qualifications, courses and other experiences of other languages and cultures. It also helps holders to estimate their own language proficiency and guide their progress by reference to a self-assessment grid taken from the Common European Framework. It consists of three parts: a language passport, a language biography and a dossier. The ‘passport’ gives a summary overview of competence in each language, by self-assessment backed up by whatever qualifications may have been obtained. The language biography goes further and encourages learners to actually write down all their experiences of language learning, as well as cultural experiences, most of which may well be informal in character but significant nevertheless, such as school exchanges, work experience, a term spent in a school abroad, a radio or television

course followed but with no examination attached to it. This means that the contribution to plurilingual competence made by experiences of many different kinds in several different languages can be set down and referred to when anyone wants to get the full picture of the breadth of a person's language and cultural experience. The language dossier can contain whatever the holder cares to put in it: samples of work done; an essay, a poem, a piece of translation, a project or a contribution to a project, an account of an exchange visit, a correspondence. Of course, the nature of the dossier is likely to change as learning progresses and the holder becomes older and more experienced. Indeed, different portfolios are envisaged for younger children, secondary school pupils, students and adults. Of course, anyone can compile a record of this kind. However, the Council of Europe logo and the name 'European Language Portfolio' are protected and proposals to issue a document to holders have to be accepted by a Validation body as complying with criteria laid down by the Council of Europe. Fifteen countries were involved in the initial piloting. Many more are now developing models

10. 1994 The European Centre for Modern Languages

The European Centre was set up in 1994 in Graz, Austria, under an 'Enlarged Partial Agreement', on the initiative of the Austrian and Netherlands governments. Initially, its establishment was largely in response to the development needs of the new member states of the Council for Cultural Co-operation, resulting from the political changes in Central and Eastern Europe. However, its activities are of value to all member states. In 1998, the Committee of Ministers established ECML on a permanent basis, defining its role in more general terms as:

1. the implementation of language policies
2. the promotion of innovative approaches to the teaching and learning of modern languages.

The strategic objectives pursued by the Centre are defined as:

- to focus on the practice of the learning and teaching of modern languages
- to promote dialogue and exchange among the various actors in the field
- to train multipliers
- to support programme related networks and research projects.

The Centre now organises its activity in medium-term projects of four years' duration. The first of these comes to an end in 2003 and its evaluation will provide the basis for the decisions to be made regarding the second.

11. 2001 The European Year of Languages

The Council of Europe and the European Union have jointly designated 2001 as the European Year of Languages. Many events have been organised in 46 of the member states of the CDCC, considerably raising the level of public awareness of language issues across the Continent. The twenty-sixth of September has been named as the European Languages Day and it following a Resolution of the Parliamentary Assembly, it is hoped that it will become an annual event.