Exploring the Microcosm and Macrocosm of Language Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

The present text looks into the growing role of languages and education in the activities of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, the process which led to the establishment of the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz. The structure of ECML programmes and the evaluation procedures employed therein will be discussed in detail. As projects completed at the ECML reflect main trends in Second Language Acquisition research as well as in second and foreign language pedagogy of the present day, thematic areas of successive medium-term programmes will also be presented with special attention given to projects recently completed.

1. The role of languages and education in the activities of the Council of Europe

In the times when the European Union attracts the attention of researchers and their institutions, it tends to be forgotten that almost all the crucial ideas and almost all the basic documents related to education, now forming the foundation of EU projects, originated in the Council of Europe.

Since 1949 the Council, founded by 10 members and now encompassing 47 states with 800 million citizens, has been involved in the work focused on human rights, social inclusion, legal cooperation, education, culture and heritage, youth and sport. From the very beginning languages were at the heart of the activities of the Council, as most of the issues crucial for its work on democratic citizenship depended on communication and intercultural dialogue. For that reason the Council engaged in activities geared to preserve and strengthen linguistic and cultural diversity. This

work resulted firstly in the birth of the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* (1992), the most important document aiming at both protection and promotion of regional and minority languages, and secondly, in the completion of the *Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe* (Beacco, Byram 2002, revised 2007), the most important document assisting national and regional governments in designing global and local activities in the field of language planning and language education. The Council also promoted the knowledge of languages among citizens of its member countries, introducing the idea of what was then referred to as plurilingualism. Promoting this idea has systematically been continued and accompanied by activities raising intercultural awareness as witnessed in the last decade by the Faro Declaration on the Council of Europe's strategy for developing intercultural dialogue (2005), the Valencia Declaration on the policy of local and regional governments (2007) and the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue *Living Together as Equals in Dignity* (2008). All those documents strongly stress the role of culture and communication in formal, informal and non-formal education. In all of them education is considered to be a pre-requisite for social cohesion and democratic citizenship, while language is seen as a pre-requisite for high quality education and employment.

In the 1970s the Council launched an important programme aiming at the promotion of languages with special emphasis on teaching languages for communication. It was the Council which commissioned the first notional-functional language syllabus and started work on a series of communicative syllabi eventually leading to the creation of a series including *Breakthrough, Waystage,* the *Threshold Level, Vantage* and *Mastery*. It was also the Council which launched two huge programmes, i.e. Programme No 4 (1978–1981) and Programme No 12 (1982–1987), both aiming at the promotion of the communicative approach and at the provision of support for teacher education in member countries (Trim 2007). And it was the Council of Europe that initiated international cooperation in the field of language education through a system of double workshops, the so-called *Ateliers Nouveau Style*, where pairs of countries identified common educational needs and engaged in three-year processes of shared problem-solving and of collaboration to implement new ideas. Groups of teachers and teacher trainers were supposed to meet for a workshop in one of the countries in order to plan research and development at the beginning of the process and three years later during the closing workshop in another country to report on what has been achieved.

At the same time the Modern Languages Project Group consisting of delegates representing 47 member states and the administrators of the Language Policy Division worked on new ideas and helped to nominate teams responsible for the work on important documents such as the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Teaching-Learning-Assessment* drafted in 1996 and published in book form five years later (2001), the *European Language Portfolio* (2001), or the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (2009).*

2. The European Centre for Modern Languages – long-term vision and quality assurance

It soon turned out that the Council, due to huge amounts of activities undertaken with government representatives, found it extremely difficult to work at grass-root levels with educational institutions and classroom teachers. A need was voiced to create an institution which would take over this kind of work and assume the role of an educational extension of the Council of Europe. The need grew stronger when the Council decided to engage in research and development in the field of language as a school subject and languages in other subjects of the school system. Especially demanding in terms of time and effort was the promotion of the concept of whole school policy for languages which stressed the fact that every school teacher is in fact a language teacher as success in all subject areas depends to a large extent on linguistic competences of the learner. With this approach professionalism of language teachers started to be considered crucial for the quality of education as well as for successful mobility and social cohesion. A new institution which would focus on language education was planned to be co-financed by the Council of Europe and those member countries which were especially interested in linguistic and cultural diversity. The Austrian government offered location and maintenance of the offices of the new institution and thus the European Centre for Modern Languages was established in Graz in 1994, that is in the 45th year of the functioning of the Council of Europe. It started as partial agreement of the Council of Europe with 34 member countries which contributed financially to the implementation of its programme. The long-term vision of the ECML has since that time included:

- focus on the learner, the learner's needs and the learner's perspective;
- building on diversity;
- promoting inclusive approaches;
- aiming at plurilingual and intercultural competences; and
- considering both formal and informal/non-formal learning contexts.

The programme of the ECML has from the very beginning been oriented towards the promotion of good practice in the field of language education as well as towards the promotion of educational innovation with special emphasis given to plurilingual and intercultural competences. *Plurilingual competences* were defined as "capacity to successfully acquire and use different competences in different languages at different levels of proficiency and for different functions" (Beacco, Byram 2007: 71), while *intercultural competences* as "a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviour which allow a speaker to recognise, understand, interpret and accept other ways of living and thinking beyond his or her home culture" (*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* 2001: 168). In order to successfully achieve those objectives it also included the creation of professional networks and the training of multipliers who would promote concepts

and solutions identified as valuable and/or innovative in their own countries. The Secretariat together with the national nominating authorities and their national contact points work with teachers, teacher trainers and researchers from particular member countries who meet at workshops and undertake team activities within particular projects. The programme, worked out along the lines of the Council of Europe's policy, is approved of by the Governing Board and by the Bureau. Synergies are sought with the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe as well as with the European Union.

Quality of the work is ensured and enhanced in a variety of ways. Emphasis is put on formative evaluation and requires built-in evaluation components within each project. Both external evaluative procedures and self-evaluation techniques are used. A set of pre- and post-event questionnaires are offered to participants, organisers and coordinators, a follow-up of findings and recommendations is also ensured. A group of four consultants advise the secretariat on the criteria and procedure of the call for projects and provide help in the process of project selection. They also support the work of the coordinators and their teams by offering feedback on annual plans and progress reports, by participating in meetings, workshops and conferences as well as by assessing the quality of proposed publications and suggesting indispensable modifications. Research on the impact of the work of the Centre is also systematically conducted.

Four-, three- and two-year projects are grouped within 4-year medium-term programmes and designed thematically before they are allotted to consultancy. Project results are published in the form of books, brochures and flyers. All the book publications can be freely downloaded from the ECML website, while travelling exhibitions help to promote them by presenting publications at congresses, conferences and symposia.

In order to gain insight into the tendencies in language education and the way they found their reflection in the work of the ECML, let us look at the main foci of the Centre's four-year programmes starting with an overview of early programmes and giving more attention to the more recent ones.

3. ECML projects and their results

3.1. Plurilingual Education – the first medium-term programme (2000–2003)

After several years of attempts at finding the most appropriate format of the work of the ECML, i.e. one that would satisfy all the member countries of the partial agreement, the idea of four-year medium term programmes was adopted. The first one was launched in the year 2000 and grouped projects around four main

topics, namely (a) the organisation and set-up of language education, (b) linguistic awareness, intercultural competence and multilingual matters, (c) information and communication technologies and (d) quality assurance and international cooperation in language education. Main concerns of the projects were changes in teacher education, the promotion of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* and quality of language teaching. All the projects of that time can be seen as falling into two thematic categories – plurilingual and pluricultural education.

In the field of *plurilingual education* the programme included projects which promoted the teaching of less widely used languages and provided checklists for evaluating programmes as has been done in the project *Neighbouring language teaching in border regions* coordinated by Ruud Halink (Halink *et al.* 2003). It also included projects aiming at the development of language awareness, also called "the awakening to languages," such as e.g. the project *Janua Linguarum – the gateway to languages* coordinated by Michel Candelier (2003). New skills in new languages were investigated in the field of literacy in the project on integrated approaches to multiliteracy coordinated by Valerie Sollars, while possibilities of building on one language in order to teach another foreign language was the subject of a project on basing the teaching of German on English coordinated by Gerhard Neuner (*ECML Programme 2000–2003*).

In the field of *pluricultural education* the programme included the work on intercultural encounters as was done in the project on cultural mediation coordinated by Geneviève Zarate as well as in Ildikó Lázár's work on developing intercultural communicative competences in language teachers. This second project resulted in two often quoted publications, i.e. *Incorporating intercultural competence in language teacher education* and *Mirrors and windows. An intercultural communication textbook* (Lázár 2003; Huber-Kriegler *et al.* 2003). An important publication resulted from Anne-Brit Fenner's (2001) *Cultural awareness and language awareness based on dialogic interaction with texts in foreign language learning.*

The concept of intercultural competence was also investigated in the project called *The development of an interactive database on intercultural anecdotes*, where the storyline approach was presented and practical authentic materials were offered in a booklet entitled *How strange!*, helpful in the development of intercultural competence of the learners (Camilleri Grima 2003).

The first medium term programme made a huge impact on teacher education in Europe as practically all the teacher training institutions in CoE member countries introduced intercultural competence into their curricula, which was soon to be manifested in the EU document entitled *The European Profile of Language Teacher Education (EPLTE)* (Kelly, Grenfell 2004), a frame of reference for the European teacher education.

3.2. Languages for Social Cohesion – Language Education in a Multilingual and Multicultural Europe – the second medium-term programme 2004–2007

The second medium-term programme was devoted to the role of languages in the growth of social cohesion. Thematic areas selected for the programme were: (a) coping with linguistic and social diversity, (b) communication in a multicultural society, (c) professional development and reference tools, and (d) innovative approaches and new technologies. Reasons for this choice can be found in the growing mobility and in consequence in increasing numbers of learners whose home language was different from the language of schooling.

In the field of *linguistic and social diversity* the project entitled *Valuing all languages in Europe* coordinated by Joanna McPake and Teresa Tinsley from the London CILT investigated languages spoken in the schools of Europe and identified 458 home languages spoken by school learners in 22 European countries. Literacy was also subject of the *Linguistic diversity and literacy in global perspective* coordinated by Brigitte Busch – project comparing European and African perspectives. Social cohesion has to be catered for systematically in formal education up to the level of universities, hence the project entitled *CHAGAL – Student-centred approaches in access programmes into higher education for under-represented adult learners* coordinated by Grete Kernegger. Inclusive educational solutions cannot ignore the needs of students with learning difficulties, hence the project *Languages for people with special educational needs* coordinated by Zoltan Póor. Tolerance can be promoted through curricular modules as has been done in the project entitled *ALC – Across languages and cultures* coordinated by Michel Candelier, but also through pedagogical exchanges as seen in the *GULLIVER* project concentrating on the secondary context and coordinated by Magdalena Bedyńska. Solutions worked out in the field of intercultural competence research were also applied to the promotion of professional mobility as manifested in *ICOPROMO – Intercultural competence for professional mobility* – a project coordinated by Evelyne Glaser (Glaser *et al.* 2007, *ECML Programme 2004–2007*).

Teacher development issues were analysed in *LEA – Language educator awareness* coordinated by Mercé Bernaus. *The CLIL Matrix* coordinated by David Marsh started work on content and language integration – issues of what and how to teach. They were also tackled in three other projects: *COCOCOPOP – Cohesion of competences, coherence of principles* – a project coordinated by Anne-Brit Fenner, which linked theory and practice in post-communicative teacher education, the often quoted *QUALITRAINING – A training guide for quality assurance* coordinated by Laura Muresan, and *ICCinTE – Intercultural communication training in teacher education*, coordinated by Ildikó Lázár and building on a successful project completed in the former medium-term programme. The project team produced a widely quoted book entitled *Developing and assessing intercultural communicative competence* (Lázár *et*

al. 1997). Good practice for institutions and not only for individual teachers was also offered in *Whole-school language profiles and policies*, a project coordinated by Antoinette Camilleri Grima and in *Group facilitation in language teacher education* – a project devoted to developing skills related to group dynamics and coordinated by Margit Szesztay. As social cohesion has to be catered for from an early age, the issue of the early start and the education of young learners came to the fore as can be seen in the project *TEMOLAYOLE – Developing teachers of modern languages to young learners* coordinated by Marianne Nikolov. Reaching towards other age groups could also be seen in *LCaS – Language case studies* – a project coordinated by Johann Fischer and concentrating on developing teacher training modules for the use of case studies in language teaching at secondary and university level.

Training guides and support tools to help teachers to competently use the *European Language Portfolio* was the aim of three important projects: *ELP-TT – Training teachers to use the European Language Portfolio* coordinated by Margarete Nezbeda, *TrainEd – Training teacher educators* by Gabriela Matei and *ELP implementation support* by Hans Ulrich Bosshard (*ECML Programme 2004–2007*).

New technologies, and especially online language teaching, became the focus of several projects of the second medium-term, such as *LQuest – The language quest assessment tool* – a project concentrating on task-based second language acquisition with the help of Internet resources, coordinated by Ton Koenraad, *Teaching languages in a virtual environment* coordinated by Ursula Stickler and *Blogs* coordinated by Mario Camilleri (*ECML Programme 2004–2007*).

It is worth noting that the second medium-term programme, although still concentrating on the teaching profession, broadened the issues of the first one by including more groups of learners and a larger variety of stakeholders reaching both the primary and the tertiary context, focusing on S.E.N. education, raising the problem of attitudes and not only professional skills and looking at issues of social cohesion from beyond the European perspective. The impact of the programme is still quite strong, all the more so because project publications can be freely downloaded from the archive as well as from the present database offered by the portal of the European Centre for Modern Languages (<www.ecml.at>).

3.3. Empowering Language Professional – Competences – Networks – Impact – Quality – the third medium-term programme 2008–2011

The last fully completed programme of the ECML covering the years 2008–2011 was oriented towards basic issues in the vision and mission of the ECML, i.e. towards ensuring high quality of language education, professional competence of language teachers, strengthening their role in reforming educational systems and building networks of professionals in support of people and ideas. Language teachers are

professionals who, by definition, work in the intercultural space, integrate language and content and in this way help to, as Kelly (2004) calls it, "decompartmentalise" language teaching. Focus on their role at the same time reflects four important trends in language learning and teaching.

The first one deals with the content of language education. Although for years language teaching consisted in concentration on the linguistic system, nowadays the importance of the type of messages carried out through language is growing. Language and non-language subjects are no longer seen as separate and in consequence bilingual education, often in the form of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) takes a central position in foreign language teaching, while languages are integrated into a broader curriculum much easier than before. Five projects were completed within that strand in 2011. *Content-based modern language teaching for young learners* presents modules with activities from the area of music, history, arts, geography and sport for young children together with didactic support for teachers to offer instruction in French, German and Russian. Materials can be used not only at foreign language lessons, but also in the course of interdisciplinary teaching in the primary context (<http://eplc.ecml.at>). A similar concept is pursued in a project building on former ECML work by the same coordinator (Mercè Bernaus), but targeting other age groups needing an interdisciplinary approach that would link language and culture. *Content based teaching + plurilingual /cultural awareness* offers 26 attractive, theme-based language and culture oriented classroom activities for children and teenagers learning English, French and Spanish. Activities are accompanied by didactic support in the form of extra information for teachers showing them how to link foreign languages with non-language subject areas (Bernaus 2011). Languages other than English are catered for in two projects. *CLIL-LOTE-START,* a project coordinated by Kim Haataja, offers a portal promoting good practice in CLIL education for German together with information and support activities for students, teachers and parents (<http://clil-lote-start.ecml.at>). *CLIL-LOTE-GO,* a project coordinated by Gerald Schlemminger, shows how to successfully integrate French language and content. The book resulting from the project – *Enseigner une discipline dans une autre langue: méthodologie et pratiques professionnelles* – contains models and approaches exemplified by classroom materials for pre- and in-service CLIL teachers (Geiger-Jaillet et al. 2011). Finally, the project *Curriculum development for content and language integrated learning* offers a generic and comprehensive curriculum framework for pre-and in-service CLIL teacher education to be used across subject areas and school levels (Marsh et al. 2010).

The second trend is connected with evaluation. Focus on this issue points to the role of quality in education in general and in language education in particular. Laura Muresan's *Quality Training at Grassroots Level* helps school managers and head teachers to ensure high quality of language education as it contains materials for group discussion and self-reflection, offers activities for sharing the best practice

and presents real life success stories (<http://qualitraining2.ecml.at>). When it comes to evaluation, the contribution of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* is fundamental, therefore ways of promoting its levels and descriptors needed special attention. *Pathways through assessing, learning and teaching in the CEFR* can be of great help for teachers who want to get acquainted with the CEFR as it offers a guide and a kit with 107 worksheets to choose from for teacher development workshops showing how to link class activities to the levels of the CEFR (Piccardo *et al.* 2011). Another project along slightly similar lines, i.e. *The level estimation grid for teachers,* coordinated by Claire Tardieu, helps to build banks of activities and create school archives of useful materials per level (<http://cefestim.ecml.at>).

The project entitled RELEX – *Training in relating language examinations* produced a booklet which contains an easy, user-friendly introduction to the procedure of linking local examinations to the CEFR and helps to link classroom-based tests to CEFR levels (Noijons *et al.* 2011). *AYLIT – Assessment of young learner literacy linked to the CEFR* coordinated by Angela Hasselgreen resulted in a publication as well as a website which offers guidelines for the assessment of reading and writing in order to support the work of primary school teachers (Hasselgreen 2011). The issue of evaluation was also extended to tertiary education as manifested by GULT, a project building on *LCaS* from the preceding medium-term, also coordinated by Johann Fischer. The follow-up project entered the realm of testing and resulted in a series of sample tests as well as guidelines for task-based university test construction, checklists and evaluation grids presented in detail in a publication entitled *Guidelines for task-based university language testing* (Fischer *et al.* 2011). With the growing importance of learner autonomy more and more teachers and learners turn to self-assessment and, therefore, ways of implementing both the *European Language Portfolio* and the *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages* into the day-to-day language teaching and learning processes are sought, shared and promoted. The project entitled *Using the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages* assists novice teachers in self-reflection and self-assessment, head teachers and teacher educators in helping young trainees, and future language teachers to develop their professional skills (Newby *et al.* 2011).

The third tendency has to do with plurilingual education. In order to encourage learners to learn more languages, research on language awareness as well as on cultural awareness is initiated among teachers working on various school levels and with learners of various age groups. A huge database is provided of descriptors divided into those related to knowledge, attitudes and skills, offered in English and French with parts in German, Spanish and Hungarian in a project entitled *A framework of reference for pluralistic approaches – CARAP/FREPA* (<http://carap.ecml. at>). *Regional/minority languages in bi-/plurilingual education: Languages from near and far* coordinated by Claude Cortier and Marisa Cavalli offers a training kit and sample activities promoting reflection and intercomprehension in order to ensure

transferability of certain teaching processes to other educational contexts (<http://ebp-ici.ecml.at>). MARILLE – *Promoting plurilingualism. Majority language in multilingual settings* coordinated by Klaus-Börge Boeckmann shows how to plan lessons so as to incorporate all the languages spoken by learners in the classroom and to teach the majority language in a way which combines elements of first and second language teaching (Boeckmann 2011). *Language associations and collaborative support* coordinated by Terry Lamb shows how to recruit members of new language associations, raise funds, incorporate new technologies and organise valuable professional activities for participating teachers (<http://lacs.ecml.at>).

Last but not least, the fourth tendency is related to the issue of *continuity*, which requires smooth passages between schools and educational levels in order to ensure a sufficient degree of coherence in the language work over longer stretches of time. Continuity also means follow-up to and sustainability of ideas introduced in earlier activities of both CoE and the ECML. New approaches to the use of technology are dealt with by two projects. *Developing online teaching skills* provides teachers with a training kit in both online and offline versions containing 30 activities for self-training in using Moodle, wikis, forums, blogs and audio-conferencing (<http://dots.ecml.at>), while *E-VOLLution: Exploring cutting edge applications of networked technologies in vocationally oriented language learning* is a project finalised in the form of a book which looks at e-skills for 21st c. teaching and learning, contains examples of how ICT can be integrated with language courses and in consequence may help teachers to create their own ICT VOLL materials (Fitzpatrick, O'Dowd 2011). Follow-up to the work on the ELP has been ensured in two projects: *The European Language Portfolio. A Guide to the planning, implementation and evaluation of whole-school projects* (Little 2011) and *Training teachers to use the European Language Portfolio* (<http://elp-tt2.ecml.at>), both of which offer websites with practical materials, videos, and worksheets for teachers and learners.

All the four strands of the third medium-term programme produce tangible results in the form of publications, websites, textbooks and databanks easily accessible online as well as in paper format provided by Council of Europe Publishing.

3.4. Learning through Languages. Promoting Inclusive, Plurilingual, Pluricultural Education – the new medium-term programme 2012–2015

The programme has just taken off the ground, it is therefore quite difficult to speak about its possible outcomes, although all the planning procedures have already been completed. What is worth stressing, however, is the fact that ideas identified at the beginning of the work of the European Centre for Modern Languages, i.e. those related to plurilingual and pluricultural education seem to be not only alive, but calling for new approaches. This is especially important in the times of the

stabilisation of English in its role of a lingua franca and in the period of economic crisis which is accompanied by a crisis of values with increased intercultural tensions. At the same time dissemination has grown in importance because of the need to communicate the results of ECML projects to a wider audience. These needs invited both developmental projects and mediation projects.

For those reasons the new medium-term programme has been divided into two different strands – one which would concentrate on the follow-up of successful projects and on ensuring continuity of work on crucial issues and one which opens up to new topics and new target groups. The former covers tender projects with predefined priorities, such as mobility, support for informal language learning, classroom for other languages, subject classroom, informal learning and mediation projects, and call for individual expert applications, while the latter – calling for team application – are to focus on regional or minority languages, support for migrant language education, innovative approaches to foreign language learning, evaluation, assessment and sign languages.

A new domain of ECML activities has also been opened. As governments seek more support than before in the field of language policy and teacher education – in parallel to new projects discussed above – the fourth medium-term programme makes a provision for the so-called targeted support. Within its frames teams of experts who under the auspices of the ECML have completed projects useful for a variety of educational contexts will offer workshops, training sessions or expertise either on the premises of the ECML or in countries requesting assistance.

4. Conclusion

The work of the ECML started by helping to raise awareness of the value of plurilingual and pluricultural education as well as helping to build a plurilingual repertoire in learners in primary and secondary education. Soon it went on to cover much broader areas such as the early language start, quality of curriculum design in tertiary education, promotion of professional mobility, developing intercultural competence across age groups and supporting the learning of S.E.N. students. Now it covers all age groups from the awakening to languages in the kindergarten, through primary, secondary and tertiary to lifelong education. This is done through offering curricular frameworks and modules, training kits with didactic support for teachers and examples of good practice for lessons of language and non-language subjects. At the same time new technologies and informal and non-formal educational activities are being incorporated in solutions offered for pre- and in-service teacher education.

Yet a number of issues will have to be tackled in the near future as schools and teachers find it difficult to strike a proper balance between content and language,

hesitate about the most appropriate organisational solutions and are often at a loss when it comes to the evaluation of educational attainment within the frames of double-focus teaching and learning. Unsolved problems of xenophobia with conflicts in countries formerly thought of as regions of peaceful coexistence of cultures and religions call for new approaches to education, language and culture. Migration and mobility pose new problems related to the role of home languages and languages of schooling. A need for including low socioeconomic status students, students with learning difficulties and S.E.N. students into mainstream education call for new methods of teaching and supporting learning as well as for a new school language policy.

Although projects undertaken in the work of the Centre over the last 16 years seem to have focused on the same, well defined set of problems, with new challenges the activity of the ECML enters a whole new field.

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