

Transversal competences in foreign language education

ECML think tank 8-9 February 2022



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with contributions from
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Report

On 8-9 February 2022 the ECML hosted a [think tank](#) on the topic of Transversal competences (TCs) in foreign language education, which brought together language professionals working in this area. It was attended by 35 participants from 31 member states. Due to covid restrictions the event was held online.

The ECML think tank was prepared and moderated by: Raili Hilden (Finland), Paula Mattila (Finland), Richard Rossner (France), Katja Zaki (Germany), David Newby (ECML consultant). Technical support was provided by Katarina Vuksic.

A comprehensive documentation of the event including videos is available on the transversal competences [website](#).

ECML think tank: Transversal competences in foreign language education 8-9 February 2022

Report

In many education systems, the development of learners' transversal competences has become an important focus of policy. Together with the foregrounding of plurilingual approaches and mediation arising from Council of Europe initiatives, such as the CEFR and its Companion Volume, this focus on TCs is having an impact on school curricula in a range of different subjects, including foreign language education.

Aims of think tank

The overall aim of the think tank was to review and explore ways in which learners' transversal competences are being developed as part of (foreign) language education, and to find solutions to the challenges of incorporating TCs in curricula, teacher education programmes and classroom teaching. In addition to providing an overview of current educational policy and practice in member states, two principal outputs of the think tank were envisaged:

- guidelines for language teachers, teacher educators and experts involved in designing or reforming foreign language curricula;
- suggestions for key areas to be the focus of an ECML follow-up project in this area.

Pre-think tank survey

As part of the think tank preparation, a survey was distributed among participants concerning the role of TCs in their educational context and their own experience of working with them. The questionnaire was completed by 30 participants. The information gathered from this survey helped the team to prepare the think tank programme and to optimise the contribution of participants. Responses to the question asking about the role, in some cases multiple roles, played by participants in their educational system revealed a wide range of expertise and experience.

- Language teachers in schools – 33%
- Teacher educators – 36%
- Government, educational authorities – 30%
- Other – 23%

Participants were further asked if they had personal experience of working on transversal competences in foreign language education. The answers to this question were:

- Yes 68%, No 25%, Don't know 7%

The fact that participants were able to contribute considerable expertise and experience from across the educational spectrum meant that a comprehensive and coherent picture of the role of TCs across Europe emerged in the course of the think tank.

[Think tank programme](#)

The programme was divided into three general themes.

- A. Towards a shared understanding of TCs
- B. Taking stock of TCs in European education
- C. Moving forward

In the following, the main insights and outcomes emerging from each theme will be outlined. Several sessions incorporated questions and topics to be discussed in small groups. The main findings of these discussions are summarised under Challenges and Recommendations below.

A. Towards a shared understanding of TCs

Richard Rossner provided an overview, definitions and a categorisation of different types of transversal competences. (A [background paper](#) was made available to participants prior to the think tank on its website.) He further outlined approaches taken by various international reference frameworks which provide descriptions of TCs (EU's Competences for Lifelong Learning, Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture etc.).

In the following group work session, participants were asked which TCs they considered to be especially important in their educational context. Summaries of discussions revealed a consensus of interest/importance in the following areas:

- Personal wellbeing - mental and emotional awareness
- Cognitive and educational – self-reflection, autonomous learning, self-management, creativity, critical thinking, problem solving
- Social – collaboration, communication and interaction
- Global – Intercultural competence, civic participation in a democracy, global citizenship
- Digital competences (in combination with other competences)

In a further question, participants were asked how these competences can best be developed. The results of this discussion fed into a later session in which participants drew up recommendations for teachers and teacher educators (see below).

B: Taking stock of TCs in European education: how TCs are currently incorporated in TCs in national/school and teacher education curricula

The aim of this session was to provide an overview of the role played by TCs in curricula in member states. In the pre-think tank survey, 79% of respondents stated that TCs were covered in their foreign language curricula and 60% in the curricula of other subjects. Moreover, answers to a further question revealed that 40% of the think tank participants have, or have had, roles related to curriculum development. Participants were thus well positioned to contribute relevant information and insights. Katja Zaki contextualised the discussions by elucidating the goals and design principles of curricula, and how TCs were embedded in them. Furthermore, she highlighted the gap between the intended curriculum, as found in national curricula, and implemented curriculum – what happens in the classroom.

The discussions were illustrated by examples of curricula from different German federal states. Railli Hilden and Paula Mattila presented the Finnish curricula, which was complemented by a practical example of implementation at school level provided by Benita

Lindström, based on three competence areas: wellbeing, interaction and global and cultural competence. Ligia Sarivan further discussed support measures taken in Romania to bridge the gap between the official curriculum and classroom practice, based on three principles: teacher education, support materials and adequate (key competence based) assessment.

B. Taking stock of TCs in European education: Teacher education and teacher development

In the pre-think tank survey, 55% of participants stated that they had received or had given training in professional development that focused on transversal competences, whereas 45% had not. This points to a certain deficit in TC-related training, both in pre- and in-service teacher education. In this session Katja Zaki discussed different types of teacher education programmes and gave examples from her own German context of how TCs are incorporated into her courses and of additional measures taken to reach out to practising teachers. Further examples of programmes and projects were provided by Dita Lapina from Latvia, Virginia Lockhart-Pedersen from Norway, Lusine Fljyan from Armenia and Laura Ambrosio from Canada.

C. Moving forward: challenges and opportunities

This final theme of the programme focused on the two intended outputs of the think tank:

- some guidelines for language teachers and teacher educators to help them incorporate transversal competences in foreign language education;
- suggestions for key areas to be the focus of an ECML follow-up project in this area.

Challenges in implementing transversal competences:

In the course of presentations and group discussions various challenges were identified that teachers, teacher educators and curriculum designers face in incorporating TCs in foreign language education. The main challenges were the following:

1. Practically all national curricula include TCs but different terms are used to refer to them - transversal competences, soft skills, 21st century skills, core competences etc. This is the source of some confusion.
2. There is a gap between 'intended curricula' (see discussion above), their implementation in schools and their attainment by learners.
3. Curricula sometimes attempt to impose a top-down approach, to which teachers react negatively, even if the topic might be of considerable interest.
4. TCs are not dealt with sufficiently in pre- and in-service teacher education.
5. TCs are not assessed directly in national exams so they are often treated as less important by teachers, students and parents.
6. Soft skills (i.e. TCs) are frequently perceived as something that students should already possess and bring to school, not something that should be worked on in the classroom.
7. Innovation can be overwhelming for teachers because of the workload and level of stress. They feel they have no time, energy or motivation to focus on aspects of education not directly related to the subject they teach.
8. TCs require cooperation - between language and subject teachers, between teachers and teacher educators etc.; this often does not exist

Recommendations for teachers, teacher educators and educational administrators.

In order to find solutions to these challenges, a wide range of recommendations were proposed by participants addressed to stakeholders across the educational spectrum. These are summarised under the following ten headings.

1. TCs in national curricula

- a. Incorporate TCs into curricula (if this is not already the case)
- b. Take measures to bridge the gap between what is specified in curricula and implementation: develop strategies for helping teachers to identify with and incorporate TCs in their teaching.
- c. Involve all stakeholders in curriculum specification. Use a bottom-up, rather than top down approach to curriculum development.

2. Selection of TCs to be focused on

- a. Agree on lists of TCs which are a priority and discuss how to integrate them.
- b. Apply some guiding principles when selecting TCs, e.g. compatibility with subject (foreign language education etc.), the future professional needs of learners, the needs of society etc.

3. Research

- a. Encourage research into TCs and listen to researchers, e.g. which TC are most relevant? How should they be worked on?
- b. Teachers should be updated on research through an approach that is informed by (but not based on) research evidence and which makes findings readily accessible to teachers.
- c. Include reference to evidence (from research, case studies etc.) that integrating TCs in learning/teaching really does have an impact on learners' abilities/strategies.

4. Teacher education – initial and in-service

- a. Ensure that TCs are part of all teachers' pedagogical training.
- b. Address the question of why do I need to incorporate TCs into my teaching? Why is it important and relevant for my students?
- c. Provide guidelines for teacher training focused on working on TCs. Offer ideas on methodology and resources for work on TCs. Include concrete examples of how these competences are/can be used.
- d. Develop adaptable modules for teacher development that draw on a pool of examples of good practice. Modules could be designed by, or in consultation with, teachers, and be cross-curricular in nature.

5. Assessment

- a. Guidelines and materials to develop TCs should be accompanied by considerations of how to assess learners' attitudes, values, skills and competences.
- b. Consider including the assessment of TCs in national examinations and school subject grades.
- c. Communicate and develop good practice in formative assessment – self- and peer assessment, portfolios etc.

6. Interdisciplinary / cross-curricular approaches

- a. Challenge and support teachers to collaborate at school level with teachers of other subjects and to engage in cross-curricular projects, e.g. history and foreign languages, and identify relevant resources for this.
- b. Identify the synergies that exist. TCs are cross-curricular and often deployed together.
- c. Work on TC-based whole school projects that are useful for the school community.

7. Collaboration / networking

- a. Improve practical collaboration, networking and exchange of ideas and expertise between university teacher education departments and school teachers.
- b. Encourage collaboration between general education and vocational training and between school and the work place.
- c. Ensure that there is local, regional and national collaboration on in-service training related to TCs to promote alignment.
- d. Organise professional learning communities, share good practice, not as a top-down exercise but in an inspirational way.
- e. To facilitate virtual and online collaboration on transversal themes, look for ways of enabling student from different schools/countries to network with one another e.g. through e-twinning
- f. Encourage teacher exchanges

8. Textbooks and learning materials

- a. Develop textbooks that are better linked to curricula and incorporate resources for working on TCs.
- b. Increase opportunities for both online and authentic learning environments to enhance life skills.

9. Real-life, unique selling points of TCs

- a. Make TCs relevant and meaningful! Bring out the aspects of their teaching which involve application of TCs. Remind teachers and school communities what they already do and show the connections with TCs.
- b. Opportunities to develop them need to be positive, authentic, and orientated towards real life and some kind of end-product. The competences/abilities need to be made evident.
- c. Make connections to working life: people outside school can often relate to transversal competences more easily than to school subjects, which also can motivate teachers to include competences in their subject teaching and help them motivate learners to see the point in developing TCs.

10. Structural aspects for administrators

- a. Address challenges: for example, working on TCs should not mean an extra work load for teachers.
- b. Consider rewarding teachers – financial, contractual status etc. – to help them recognize the students' and their own achievements in developing TCs

Building on the insights provided in presentations and group, the final task of the think tank was to gather ideas from participants on what might comprise the content of a follow-up ECML project relating to certain aspects highlighted in the above recommendations. Having been provided with information about how ECML projects are structured and how the call for proposals operates, participants were invited to suggest what the aims, target groups and intended outcomes of a project could be. The main ideas emerging from discussions were the following:

General points

- The main target groups of a project should be teachers and teacher educators, both pre- and in-service.
- The overall goal of a project should be to bridge the gap between curriculum and the language classroom and to increase the acceptability among teachers of incorporating TCs in their teaching.
- Clarifying what TCs are and selecting which TCs should be the subject of a project are an important starting point.
- Creating a community for collaboration at school, regional and international levels is an essential means of implementing such an approach.

Project ideas from the five groups

1. Creation of communities of learning within and between schools with a support agenda for collaborative approaches to understanding and implementing TCs.
2. A focus on intra- and interpersonal competences and critical thinking within a framework which makes theoretical aspects of TCs accessible to teachers and provides practical materials to support the implementation of TCs in the classroom and guidelines on how to develop materials.
3. Guidelines for integrating TCs in foreign language education in several languages, focusing on a specified number of TCs. These should include case studies with examples of teaching materials and suggestions for forms of assessment.
4. Development of training modules, guided by appropriate research projects (see 'Recommendations – Research' above). Such modules would include teaching materials and assessment and would integrate whole-school approaches.
5. Empowering teachers of all subjects to implement TCs through interdisciplinary work by helping them to understand the value of TCs and providing frameworks for pre-service and in-service teacher education which includes modules for teaching and assessment, interviews and reflection activities.

In the final session of the think tank participants were requested to fill in a Personal Action Plan, one question of which asked: Are you interested in initiating and/or contributing to an ECML project relating to TCs? Three options were given: yes, perhaps, no.

Of the 30 participants who completed the Action Plan, 13 stated that they would be interested; a further 16 answered 'perhaps'. This clearly indicates both the importance of transversal competences for language professionals and the motivation of think tank participants to further explore the topic.

Conclusion

The think tank succeeded in providing a very clear picture of the state of the art of transversal competences in foreign language teaching in member states. The excellent contributions of highly competent and experienced participants provided a wealth of insights for the comprehensive list of recommendations that were drawn up. The need for, and interest, in a follow-up project was clearly apparent from responses to the action Plan.

In recent years, European countries have been moving steadily towards implementing the CEFR and its Companion Volume, which opens up increased opportunities for setting curricular goals/learning outcomes and designing assessment procedures related to TCs. The publication of the [Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture](#) (RFCDC) is an additional source of support, which a future ECML project could very profitably draw on.



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