

# Report on the ECML's think tanks on whole-school approaches to the language(s) of schooling and on early language learning

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## 1 Introduction: the think tank concept

The ECML's call for submissions for its 2016–2019 programme included early language learning (ELL), whole-school approaches to the language(s) of schooling, and learner pathways/autonomous learning. As no suitable project proposals were received for these areas, it was decided to organize a think tank on each of them with a view to capturing “information on issues and challenges as well as examples of good, replicable practice” and making “specific recommendations as to how the ECML should support its member states in relation to these ... fields within the current programme”.<sup>1</sup> The think tank process consisted of two stages: an online survey of self-selected language education stakeholders and a two-day think tank meeting held at the ECML. Participants in this meeting, were selected partly on the basis of their response to the online survey.

This report briefly explains the position occupied by the language(s) of schooling and by ELL in the Council of Europe's recent work on language education, identifies major preoccupations that emerged from the online survey in each area, summarises the recommendations from each of the think tank meetings, and concludes with some reflections on possible future actions.

## 2. Languages of schooling and early language learning in the recent work of the Council of Europe

### 2.1 Introduction

Up to and including the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR),<sup>2</sup> the Council of Europe's work on language education was concerned with the learning and teaching of foreign languages. More recent work has taken its inspiration from the concept of plurilingualism, defined by the CEFR as “a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact”.<sup>3</sup> Just as the individual citizen is the subject of the *European Convention on Human Rights*, so the plurilingual learner should be the central focus of an education in which language plays a dual role, as medium of teaching and learning (language(s) of schooling; foreign languages used in CLIL programmes) and as curriculum content (the national language; regional and minority languages; modern foreign and classical languages). According to the plurilingual approach, the goal of language education is to foster the development

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<sup>1</sup> These phrases are taken from the e-mail that was used to make stakeholders aware of the online surveys on the Language(s) of Schooling and Early Language Learning.

<sup>2</sup> *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, 4.

of each individual's plurilingual competence as a fully integrated communicative and cognitive resource. This is the core message of the Council of Europe's guide to the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education.<sup>4</sup>

## 2.2 Language(s) of schooling

The Council of Europe's work on the language(s) of schooling addresses two concerns. The first arises from the many differences between the language of everyday communication and academic language – differences that pose a challenge to all learners but especially those from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. To help learners meet this challenge, it is necessary to define the terminology and describe the discourse genres characteristic of different curriculum subjects and to find ways of helping learners to master them.<sup>5</sup> The second concern arises from the fact that in an age of mass migration, large numbers of school-going children and adolescents have a home language that is not (a variety of) the language of schooling. In order to gain access to education they must become proficient in the language of schooling as a second language before going on to master its various subject-specific dialects and registers.<sup>6</sup> These concerns are reflected in two recent recommendations from the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers to its member states: Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)13E, on ensuring quality education; and Recommendation CM/Rec(2014)5, on the importance of competences in the language(s) of schooling for equity and quality in education and for educational success.

The two concerns are, of course, closely related. In Canada and the United States, for example, much of the research that has explored the complexities of English as language of schooling has been driven by the need to accommodate learners for whom English is a second language. Cummins's seminal distinction between BICS (basic interpersonal communication skills) and CALP (cognitive academic language proficiency)<sup>7</sup> was originally devised to explain the fact that whereas immigrant pupils often become proficient in informal spoken English in two years, it usually takes them much longer to master academic English.

In the ECML's 2012–2015 programme four projects addressed these concerns in a variety of ways:

- *MALEDIVE – Teaching the language of schooling in the context of diversity: study materials for teacher development*
- *A pluriliteracies approach to teaching for learning*
- *Language descriptors: language skills for successful subject learning – CEFR-linked descriptors for mathematics and history/civics*

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<sup>4</sup> J.-C. Beacco, M. Byram, M. Cavalli, D. Coste M. Egli Cuenat, F. Goullier and J. Panthier, *Plurilingual and intercultural education: Guide for the development and implementation of curricula*, 2nd edition, Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, J.-C. Beacco, M. Fleming, F. Goullier, E. Thürmann, H. Vollmer and J. Sheils, *A handbook for curriculum development and teacher training: The language dimension in all subjects*, 2nd edition, Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> D. Little, *The linguistic and educational integration of children and adolescents from migrant backgrounds*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, J. Cummins, Cognitive/academic language proficiency, linguistic interdependence, the optimum age question and some other matters, *Working Papers on Bilingualism*, 19 (1979), 197–205.

- *PlurCur – Towards whole-school language curricula: examples of practice in schools*

The 2016–2019 programme includes, in addition to the think tank, a project on *Developing language awareness in subject classes* and training and consultancy on *Supporting multilingual classrooms*.

### 2.3 Early language learning

ELL has been identified as a key element in European education by the European Commission, which published a research report on the principles that underlie the teaching of languages to very young learners in 2006<sup>8</sup> and a policy handbook in 2011.<sup>9</sup> The Council of Europe, on the other hand, has not adopted a specific policy stance on ELL. Viewed from the perspective of compulsory education, the proficiency levels of the CEFR reflect a trajectory of foreign language learning that begins in lower secondary and advances through upper secondary and vocational to higher education; and the European Language Portfolio (ELP) was originally conceived as a tool to support lifelong language learning rather than foreign language teaching at school. Both these tools have nevertheless been applied to ELL. The Council of Europe’s ELP website records three validated and one registered model for pre-primary learners, and 32 validated and five registered models for primary learners. The checklists of “I can” descriptors that are fundamental to the ELP’s goal-setting and self-assessment functions are linked to the CEFR’s proficiency levels. Thus, the development of ELPs for pre-primary and primary learners made it necessary to adapt CEFR descriptors to make them appropriate to the cognitive and behavioural capacities of very young learners and the contexts of language use available to them. A similar process underlies the development of CEFR-related L2 curricula for this age group. In Ireland, for example, the teaching of English as an Additional Language to primary pupils from immigrant families has been supported by *English language proficiency benchmarks* that recast the CEFR’s first three levels in relation to the linguistic demands and recurrent themes of the primary curriculum and the communicative context of the primary classroom.<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that primary schooling is included in *The language dimension in all subjects*,<sup>11</sup> a handbook for curriculum development and teacher training produced by the project *Languages in education, languages for education*, and also in the same project’s concept paper *The linguistic and educational integration of children and adolescents from migrant backgrounds*.<sup>12</sup>

ELL is a relatively recent concern of European education systems. Developments in pre-primary education have mostly been driven by the desire to prepare children for primary education that will be delivered in a language they do not already know. In some countries, for example, playgroups and nursery schools that cater for children from immigrant families use their home languages to support their learning of the language of schooling; while in Ireland, *naíonraí* (Irish-medium playgroups)

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<sup>8</sup> P. Edenlebos, R. Johnstone and A. Kubanek, *The main pedagogical principles underlying the teaching of languages to very young learners*, Brussels: European Commission.

<sup>9</sup> *Language Learning at Pre-primary School Level: Making it Efficient and Sustainable*. Commission Staff Working Paper, Brussels: European Commission, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> The *Benchmarks* and a related ELP model are available at [www.ncca.ie/iilt](http://www.ncca.ie/iilt).

<sup>11</sup> J.-C. Beacco, M. Fleming, F. Goullier, E. Thürmann, H. Vollmer and J. Sheils, *The language dimension in all subjects*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> D. Little, *The linguistic and educational integration of children and adolescents from migrant backgrounds*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2010. Available at [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Childmigrants/Ressources\\_EN.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Childmigrants/Ressources_EN.asp).

prepare children from English-speaking families for Irish-medium education. At primary level the emphasis is sometimes on raising pupils' language awareness and arousing their interest in language learning, as with the *Éveil aux langues* movement in France and similar initiatives in other countries; sometimes, on the other hand, the goal is to give learners an early start in a language they will continue to learn at secondary school.

The ECML has done much to support ELL in its successive four-year programmes. Its website currently lists the following publications produced by projects that directly or indirectly have addressed the challenges of ELL:

- *European portfolio for pre-primary educators: the plurilingual and intercultural dimension*
- *Parents and teachers: working together for plurilingual and intercultural education*
- *Plurilingual and intercultural learning through mobility: practical resources for teachers and teacher trainers*
- *Plurilingual and intercultural competences: descriptors and teaching materials*
- *EPLC – Content-based teaching for young learners*
- *AYLITT – Assessment of young learner literacy linked to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*
- *CONBAT – Plurilingualism and pluriculturalism in content-based teaching; a training kit*
- *TEMOLAYOLE – Teaching modern languages to young learners: teachers, curricula and materials*
- *Information and Communication Technologies and young language learners*

In addition, as part of its current programme the ECML offers training and consultancy in

- *Supporting multilingual classrooms*
- *Plurilingual and intercultural learning through mobility*
- *Plurilingual and intercultural competences: descriptors and teaching materials (FREPA)*

### **3 Key findings from the consultation questionnaires**

#### **3.1 Whole-school approaches to the language(s) of schooling**

Responses to the online questionnaire were predictably diverse, perhaps reflecting the fact that each country has its own educational culture, structures and infrastructures. Whether the focus is on academic language or the integration of immigrant children and adolescents, general proposals inevitably run up against situational constraints. These are evident in the responses to many of the questions. For example, a respondent from Austria pointed out that it is much easier to implement a whole-school approach at primary than at post-primary level, while a respondent from France thought the traditional division of the French curriculum into three discrete areas was likely to prove an obstacle (question 15); on the role of head teachers (question 17) several respondents noted that in their context the head teacher's powers are limited; and question 19, on the implementation of whole-school approaches, elicited some of the most detailed responses but also some of the most diverse. Question 21 asked whether it is important for each school to develop and make public its language policy or strategy. Although most respondents replied in the positive, some noted that in their context this is

already obligatory, whereas others thought that such a requirement was likely to give rise to political problems.

### **3.2 Early language learning**

Here too, responses to the online questionnaire were quite diverse, especially as regards how ELL should be organized. There was nevertheless a noticeable tendency to think in terms of language *lessons*, which implies a clear separation between the language of schooling and curriculum languages. Despite the fact that the CEFR is not designed to accommodate the needs of ELL, most respondents had no hesitation in using its proficiency levels to define the learning achievement appropriate by the end of primary schooling. The majority opted for A1/A2 and a minority for B1/B2 (B2 was also widely cited as the minimum proficiency level that ELL teachers should possess in the language(s) they are teaching). “Plurilingual education” was quite often referred to, though no respondent explained what it is, far less what it implies for classroom practice. A large number of respondents expressed a need for language tests aligned with the CEFR, apparently believing that reliable assessment is the key to effective teaching. Against this general tendency, one respondent referred to Learning-oriented Assessment, a few to Assessment for Learning, and a few more to portfolio assessment using the European Language Portfolio.

## **4 Recommendations from the think tank meetings and some reflections on possible future action**

### **4.1 Whole-school approaches to the language(s) of schooling**

Members of the think tank put forward four draft proposals to the ECML Secretariat, which, when combined, included the following elements:

- A new thematic area will be created on the ECML’s website dedicated to the language/s of schooling to help practitioners find relevant material easily 2017-2018:
- A new two-year project “Whole-school approaches to the languages of schooling” which combines key elements from the list below:
  - Mapping of different assessment practices used in this context to highlight challenges and examples of good practice
  - Web-based “roadmap” for schools consisting of a diagnostic tool which helps schools understand why the topic matters (awareness-raising videos and questions) and what their own needs are;
  - examples of challenges and solutions; links to relevant resources (ECML, LPU and other) with examples of how these can be used in practice;
  - examples of classroom interventions and of collaboration between teachers of different subjects:
  - support for assessment and quality assurance – all based on the principle of self-assessment
  - Guidelines for schools on how to develop whole-school approach with dedicated sections for the different target groups: parents, head teachers, language teachers, subject

teachers etc., incorporated into a school portfolio to allow for progress to be recorded and goals set

- A new ECML Training and Consultancy module on whole-school cooperation in the language/s of schooling to expand the existing modules on offer within “Supporting multilingual classrooms”

These three elements mirror exactly the three kinds of support which the ECML can provide: information and examples made available on its website; tools developed by teams of experts in consultation with language education professionals drawn from the member states; and training and consultancy delivered in member states. Different education systems make different arrangements to support the linguistic integration of migrant children and adolescents. If they are embedded in a whole-school approach, all of the approaches listed in question 6 of the survey questionnaire can be made to work. One component of a project on the language(s) of schooling might be a series of case studies that report on how different approaches taken in this area succeed within their own specific contexts of policy and practice (the 2012–2015 *PlurCur* project provides a useful precedent). Case studies should be evidence-driven, illustrating successful rather than “promising” practice. The selection of case studies might best be made by a small team of experts with a track record of relevant research. Based on the findings of the case-studies, appropriate support tools applicable in different contexts could be developed. The same team, working with the experts behind the case studies, could also provide training and consultancy in the member states.

## 4.2 Early language learning

Members of the think tank put forward three draft proposals to the ECML Secretariat. These were:

- A three-year development project to create a professional learning community on the basis of existing ECML resources;
- The development of modules for pre- and in-service teacher education;
- A project to develop a holistic, integrated pedagogical approach in which all languages are embedded in everyday activity.

Of the three proposals that emerged from the think tank meeting, the third appears to be the most promising in terms of its likely impact. This is because it has the potential to show how, in different educational contexts, the concept of “plurilingual education” can be converted into classroom reality. Such a demonstration is long overdue.

The CEFR is not a language teaching manual. Nevertheless, its description of language proficiency in terms of language use has clear pedagogical implications. Consider the celebrated summary of its approach at the beginning of Chapter 2:

*“Language use, embracing language learning, comprises the actions performed by persons who as individuals and as social agents develop a range of competences, both general and in particular communicative language competences. They draw on the competences at their disposal in various contexts under various conditions and under various constraints to engage in language activities*

*involving language processes to produce and/or receive texts in relation to themes in specific domains, activating those strategies which seem most appropriate for carrying out the tasks to be accomplished. The monitoring of these actions by the participants leads to the reinforcement or modification of their competences.”*

According to this summary, language use entails that we draw on our competences – knowledge, skills, experience and characteristics – when we engage in communicative activities; and language learning is a variety of language use in the sense that proficiency develops from sustained interaction between the learner’s gradually developing competences and the communicative tasks whose performance requires him or her to use the target language. It seems clear from this that (i) if learners are to develop a proficiency that allows them to act as individuals and social agents, the target language itself should be the principal medium of their learning, and (ii) their learning should be organized so as to give them unlimited access to initiating as well as responding discourse roles. By exercising their agency in the target language, learners gradually develop a proficiency that adds a new dimension to their identity. This is what the CEFR means by plurilingualism.

The CEFR explains “the plurilingual approach” as follows: *“As an individual person’s experience of language in its cultural contexts expands, from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples (whether learnt at school or college, or by direct experience), he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact.”*

According to this definition, all languages in a plurilingual repertoire have the same cognitive status; that is, they are all equally available for use, though typically the user/learner can do more in some languages than in others. We know from the European Commission’s First European survey on language competences, however, that this is not always the outcome of language teaching in Europe’s education systems. Recognizing this, researchers into linguistic multi-competence have begun to distinguish between “L2 learners” in formal education and “language users” in the real world.

Whatever language learners bring with them to school and whatever languages school sets out to teach them, a pedagogical revolution is clearly needed if the ideal of plurilingual education is to become a reality. Such a revolution would be driven by approaches that teach languages through rather than merely for communicative use; approaches that ensure that each language taught is an “everyday lived language” in the immediate context of learning. This is already a familiar concept in some areas of ELL. It underlies, for example, the “English learning areas” developed in Portugal by Sandy Murao, one of the participants in the think tank meeting, and the approach to the integration of primary pupils from immigrant families described by Déirdre Kirwan at the same meeting. It is also fundamental to the successful implementation of CLIL at any educational level.

The task of the project team would be to identify a small number of projects, including CLIL, and to assemble case studies, including video samples, that can be made available on the ECML’s website. The case studies could also be presented in a publication that would discuss in greater detail (i) the implications for language teaching of the CEFR’s view of language learning as language use, and (ii) the meaning of “plurilingual education”. A successful project of this kind would provide a basis for training and consultancy in the ECML’s next four-year programme. In due course it might also be

extended upwards from primary through lower and upper secondary to vocational and higher education.

## **Conclusion**

The Bureau of the Governing Board of the ECML has agreed for two new projects to be launched, as outlined in the proposals which emerged from the think tank meetings. The background information and the recommendations included in this report will help steer these new projects.

David Little, February 2017