

ForumSprache

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Quality education for plurilingual people living in multilingual societies: Professional Network Forum on Language Education

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Encouraged by its Governing Board, the European Center for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe in Graz, Austria, is seeking to intensify its links with a number of institutions and associations with similar aims. Following on from the Memorandum of Cooperation, which was signed by the European Centre for Modern Languages and the Canadian authorities in 2008, the Centre has developed a generic cooperation agreement which outlines the modalities of the desired cooperation and formalises the commitment to work together. The agreement was signed so far by eight new partner organisations: the European Association for Quality Language Services (EAQUALS), the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE), the International Certificate Conference (ICC), the European Confédération of Language Centres in Higher Education (CercleS), the International Federation of Language Teacher Associations / Fédération Internationale des Professeurs de Langues Vivantes (FIPLV), the International Association of Applied Linguistics (AILA), the European Association for Language Testing and Assessment (EALTA) and Conseil européen pour les langues/European Language Council (CEL/ELC).

An idea that was born in this context was to establish a Professional Network Forum on Language Education where leaders of these INGOs would meet under the auspices of the Council of Europe at the ECML in Graz. Such meetings, held annually, would aim at taking stock of current language education issues and challenges as viewed from the perspective of each organisation ('What keeps us busy?') and providing a platform for better cooperation and coordination of efforts ('How can we enhance synergies in cooperation?'). A common statement to the professional audience at large addressing the most urgent matters in European language education ('a Graz declaration') could be adopted each time.

All the professional associations that were approached to sign the agreement of cooperation with the ECML have reacted positively to this initiative. Leaders of these associations came to the ECML in Graz on 7 January 2010 to establish a Professional Network Forum on Language Education. Participating in the meeting was also a representative of the Canadian partner – the Official Languages and Bilingualism Institute of the University of Ottawa (OLBI). Representatives of the other two units constituting the Department of Language Education and Policy of the Council of Europe – the Language Policy Division and the secretariat of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages were invited, too. The European Commission was represented by the Head of Multilingualism Policy Unit in the Directorate General for Education and Culture. Henry Widdowson (Vienna University) provided comments from the perspective of an independent expert in the field.

The four main sessions on the agenda of the meeting were based on brief presentations given by each participant, followed by extensive discussions. To facilitate the

organisation of the event's content and outputs, the participants were invited to prepare and send in their presentations organised around the five points specified below:

- ▶ “Partner profile”: Brief presentation of the organisation/institution – mission, membership, basic data.
- ▶ “Partner highlights”: Activities/initiatives/projects/products/publications/events of the organisation/institution to be highlighted and promoted/disseminated through the Network – completed, on-going, or planned.
- ▶ “Burning issues”: Issues/needs/challenges related to language education that – from the perspective of the organisation/institution – require coordinated action on the international level within the next few years (2010-2015).
- ▶ “Action points”: Possible/desirable joint actions/initiatives/events for the Network to undertake in the near future.
- ▶ “ECML projects”: Issues/topics/themes suggested to be taken up by international project teams within the next ECML medium-term programme of activities (2012-2015) – specifically those with high potential for involvement/contribution from the organisation/institution.

The envisaged outcomes/outputs of the meeting were specified as follows:

1. Professional Network Forum presentation, mission statement, and action plan (based on information provided under “Partner profile”, “Partner highlights”, “Action points”, and during discussions).
2. Graz Declaration on Language Education 2010 (based on information provided under “Burning issues” and during discussions).
3. Input for ECML medium term programme 2012-2015 (based on information provided under “ECML projects” and during discussions).

The meeting generated many useful insights – both for the action plan of the network itself and for the next medium-term programme of ECML activities. The presentations and discussions focussed on the many burning issues identified in the field and on proposed joint actions. All participants agreed to continue the network cooperation and were in favour of holding future forum meetings on well-selected issues. Further details about the meeting can be found on the ECML website: www.ecml.at. The complete text of the Graz Declaration on Language Education 2010 adopted by the Forum is presented below.

“Quality education for plurilingual people living in multilingual societies”: Graz Declaration on Language Education 2010

Background

On 7 January 2010, in Graz, Austria, the INGO-Professional Network Forum on language education was founded at the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) of the Council of Europe. The first ever meeting of its kind brought together eight renowned international associations working in this area, all of which had signed bilateral cooperation agreements with the ECML. Representatives of the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe, the Multilingualism Policy Unit of the European Commission, and the Canadian institutional ECML partner, the Official Languages and Bilingualism Institute of the University of Ottawa (OLBI), also participated in the meeting. Henry Widdowson (Vienna University) provided comments from the perspective of an independent expert in the field. The one-day event enabled the Forum partners to gain a better understanding of the working context and the respective competences of the associations, all of which deal with different aspects of policy, research and practice in language education. The meeting also enabled them to identify and become more aware of the shared concerns and overlapping expertise within the Professional Network Forum.

After lively discussions on the key challenges facing language education today and on suitable areas for common action, the Forum members unanimously agreed to seek opportunities for further cooperation.

The Graz Declaration 2010 is a direct result of this meeting. It represents a summary of issues raised in the discussions, and provides the basis for the creation of this new Forum, as well as for the activities to be undertaken by it.

Preamble

The increased mobility of people, and the globalisation of social and economic processes stimulated by rapid innovations in communication technology create new challenges for educational systems, such as the reality of progressively more multilingual and multicultural classrooms, the need for compatibility between educational systems and qualifications, and the use of mobile media. These challenges call for the urgent development and implementation of new approaches to education in general, and language education in particular (policy-making, teacher education, learning, teaching, and assessment). A new concept of education is required to meet the needs of plurilingual people living in increasingly multilingual societies – people who are capable of using several languages at different levels of competence, living in and contributing to an integrated society and to an international interaction.

I. Rationale for a new concept

1. Linguistic and cultural diversity in modern European societies is increasingly a reality. This phenomenon should not be viewed as an obstacle or a ‘problem’, but rather as an asset and a potential benefit to society.
2. Social cohesion, intercultural dialogue, and democratic citizenship, together with economic prosperity, represent important aims in building a more humane and inclusive Europe.
3. Unrestricted and fair lifelong access to good quality education is a fundamental human right and a pre-requisite for achieving the above aims.
4. As all education uses language as its vehicle, well-developed language competences are a necessary basis for adequate access to good quality education and successful learning.
5. Good quality education cannot be achieved without adequate support for the appropriate development of learners’ language competence – efficient and effective use of one or more languages is both necessary for successful education and one of its desired outcomes.
6. Good quality education aims to provide effective support for further developing the knowledge and skills already possessed by learners in order to assist them to become successful individuals and responsible members of society.
7. Adequate support for the development of learners’ language competence takes into account, makes use of, and builds further on learners’ existing language competences and seeks, among other things, to develop the language skills required for their education to be successful in a given context.
8. For these reasons, a shift in focus is required from support for the development of competences in separate ‘languages’ to enhancing the development of a general, individual strategy for deploying available linguistic resources purposefully, thus making efficient use of one’s own range of language competences.
9. Effective use of communication technologies can play an important role in this strategy.
10. Special attention and support for the development of the language abilities required for educational success in a given context needs to be provided to ‘vulnerable’ learners: those with low socio-economic status and those whose linguistic background may disadvantage them in the educational system.

II. Important elements of the new concept of language education

A. Planning and organisation

1. Provision of a comprehensive overview of valid European and international reference sources on which to base national, regional, and local language education policies, strategies, and practices.
2. The establishment of an international forum for discussion and clarification of language education policies and their implementation.
3. Integrated approaches to language education at national, regional, and local level (policy-making, teacher education, learning, teaching, and assessment) encompassing all languages present in the education system.
4. The development of a common approach to the assurance and enhancement of the quality of support for language learning across all sectors.
5. Approaches aimed at overcoming compartmentalisation in education, and promoting co-operation between:
 - ▶ teachers of different foreign languages;
 - ▶ foreign language teachers and teachers of the main national language as a school subject (German in Germany, Swedish in Sweden, etc);
 - ▶ language teachers and teachers of other subjects.

B. Research

1. Closer international and regional cooperation aimed at disseminating and implementing research results that are relevant to the development of new language policies and practices, thus bridging the gap between research findings and policy making.
2. Ensuring that relevant research projects are designed to address new challenges in the field of language education and that the results of the research are properly analysed and disseminated.

C. Teacher education and training

1. Identifying and monitoring changes in the professional competences needed by language teaching professionals, including those working in special situations (e.g. with adult migrants, very young learners, in vocational education and training).
2. Innovative teacher education programmes aimed at attracting newcomers to the language teaching profession.
3. The development and implementation of mobility programmes for teachers.
4. The development of national, regional, and international recognition schemes promoting quality and outstanding achievement in (language) education.

D. Learning, teaching, assessment – use of recently developed methods and technologies

1. Research into and use of accelerated language learning approaches to develop plurilingual competences (e.g. based on inter-comprehension).
2. The wider use of ‘personal language profiles’ (e.g. in language portfolios) which are reflected upon, built up, documented, and evaluated on an on-going basis.
3. The development of new approaches to learning, teaching, and assessment in multilingual and multicultural classrooms, including among recently arrived migrants,
4. The further development of ‘assessment literacy’ (the ability to discuss and develop means and instruments of assessment) in language education.
5. Enhancing the professionalism of high-stakes evaluation, assessment and testing in all educational sectors.
6. The development of approaches to assessing plurilingual competences (focus on the user and his/her plurilingual profile).

7. The development of reference standards for competences in the languages of schooling and academic education (languages taught as specific subjects and used across the curriculum), as well as for support for the linguistic integration of adult migrants.
8. The development of reference level descriptors for most widely taught non-European languages based on CEFR principles.
9. Further work on the mutual recognition of language qualifications, specifically in less widely taught languages and languages for specific purposes, based upon reliable and transparent use of common reference frameworks, such as the CEFR.
10. A redefinition of the concept of literacy in multilingual communities in the light of communication technologies that provide new reading and writing contexts.
11. The development of appropriate pedagogies for the effective use of new technologies in (language) education.

E. Use of Council of Europe instruments

1. Further development and implementation of Council of Europe tools, such as the CEFR and the ELP.
2. Implementation of relevant Council of Europe recommendations, such as Recommendation (2008)7 on the use of the CEFR and the promotion of plurilingualism.

Conclusion

The members of the Professional Network Forum, representing independent associations and institutions, endeavour to take the lead in and/or support the development, dissemination, and promotion of these elements in accordance with the specific character of each organisation and institution and within their respective areas of activity.

Graz, 7 January 2010

- ▶ Bernd Rüschoff, the International Association of Applied Linguistics (AILA)
- ▶ Berit Halvorsen, the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE)
- ▶ Johann Fischer, the European Confederation of Language Centres in Higher Education (CercleS)
- ▶ Sauli Takala, the European Association for Language Testing and Assessment (EALTA)
- ▶ Peter Brown, the European Association for Quality Language Services (EAQUALS)
- ▶ Waldemar Martyniuk, the European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe (ECML)
- ▶ Wolfgang Mackiewicz, Conseil européen pour les langues / European Language Council (CEL/ELC)
- ▶ Terry Lamb, the International Federation of Language Teacher Associations / Fédération Internationale des Professeurs de Langues Vivantes (FIPLV)
- ▶ Rolf Schärer, the International Certificate Conference (ICC)
- ▶ Aline Germain-Rutherford, the Official Languages and Bilingualism Institute of the University of Ottawa (OLBI), Canada