

# **Multilingual Competences for Professional and Social Success in Europe**

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## **Inauguration lecture**

### **Linguistic Competences and the Development of Modern European Society**

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Minister Hall

Director-General Martikonis

Distinguished participants

Ladies and gentlemen

Colleagues and friends

Before all else, I should like to say how pleased and honoured I am to have been invited to speak at this Conference. For one thing, my association, the Conseil européen pour les langues / European Language Council - in other words, the CEL/ELC -, is delighted that the Polish government should have seen fit to make individual multilingualism a priority of the programme of its Presidency of the Council of the European Union. For another, I have very happy memories of previous language-related visits to Warsaw. Twenty-one years ago, I came to the Polish capital as head of a G-24 mission on languages to Poland, and in September 2007, the University of Warsaw hosted one of four regional conferences organized by a network project in which we sought to disseminate the findings of our third three-year Erasmus Thematic Network project in the area of languages; back then, one of our sub-themes was "linguistic and cross-cultural skills and competences for enhanced opportunities on the European and international labour market". It is still a bit of a miracle for me how on that occasion Jolanta Urbanik managed to wheel on a number of important and eloquent business representatives. By common consent, the Warsaw conference was an outstanding dissemination event.

The CEL/ELC was founded in 1997 with support from the European Commission - in the wake of the publication of the European Commission's White Paper on Teaching and Learning of

1995, which set out five general objectives for the building a learning society. One of these objectives was “Proficiency in three Community languages”. I think it is worth recalling the main ideas and proposals put forward by the Commission under this objective, because this way, we shall be able to identify a number of basic principles still valid today, while at the same time fully understanding the dramatic language-relevant changes that have since occurred and that we have to take into consideration when reflecting on the linguistic challenges we are confronted with and have to meet in the Union of today.

As regards languages, at the heart of the White Paper was a sentence that none of us will ever forget. “Proficiency in several Community languages has become a precondition if citizens of the European Union are to benefit from the occupational and personal opportunities open to them in the border-free Single Market.” And then the key sentence – “it is becoming necessary for everyone, irrespective of training and education routes chosen, to acquire and keep up their ability in at least two Community languages in addition to their mother tongue” – in other words – the famous 1+>2 formula.

The following points are particularly noteworthy.

- (i) The learning of other languages is to serve the aim of **acquiring the ability to communicate** in those languages.
- (ii) Proficiency in at least two foreign languages is regarded as **a must for everyone** – not just for an elite – in other words, the **principle of equity** applies.
- (iii) The learning of one foreign language is not enough; **the goal is multilingual**, not bilingual **proficiency**.
- (iv) Learning other languages is **relevant to personal development**. Quote - “it opens the mind, stimulates intellectual agility and, of course, expands people’s cultural horizon”.
- (v) Language proficiency is linked to occupational opportunities – in other words, to **employability**. Quote - “language learning ... is an advantage when it comes to obtaining a job, either within one’s home country or when taking up the option of mobility available within the Union”.
- (vi) Although the 1+>2 formula makes a distinction between mother tongue and foreign languages, the White Paper first and foremost speaks of “proficiency in three Community languages”, thereby highlighting the importance of considering **a person’s linguistic repertoire in its entirety**.

It seems to me that these principles are as relevant today as they were in the mid-nineties.

Of course, other principles spelt out in the White Paper today appear rather dated. The fact that individual multilingualism was limited to “Community languages”, that is to say, to the official languages of the European Union, was directly linked to the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, which established the European Union and introduced EU citizenship. In general, in Europe, citizenship had been part of the concept of one language-one culture-one nation-

one state. It is clear that the EU was not to be modeled on the nation state and its principle of one language only. The Union was to maintain its linguistic diversity as enshrined in the famous Regulation No 1 passed by the Council of the European Economic Community on 15 April 1958. The Regulation gave equal status to the official state languages of Member States, making them official and working languages of the EEC. The White Paper transferred the principle underlying the Communities' language regime to language education in the Union. The 1+>2 formula was to provide a general guideline for language education in EU Member States. And language learning and individual multilingualism were directly linked to the Union's economic and general political aims of the day – in the words of the White Paper – “Multilingualism is part and parcel of both European identity / citizenship and the learning society”. Hence the concept of an exclusive language education policy.

Incidentally, the White Paper also addressed the issue of how the objective could be implemented. Two methodological approaches were flagged: early language learning, and content and language integrated learning. While the White Paper emphasized the role of formal education in language learning, the fact that the Commission soon after supported a large-scale project – DIALANG – for the development of diagnostic tests in 14 official European languages on the Internet shows that the Commission was also aware of opportunities offered by informal and non-formal language learning.

Don't worry – I am not going to give you a complete overview of the Union's language policy as it was developed in the first decade of this century. Let me just add that the EU's language education policy gained a new and powerful momentum as a result of the Lisbon Strategy adopted by the Member States in March 2000, which set out an ambitious economic and societal agenda for the decade. Language learning came to be regarded as being highly important for the EU's economic performance, that is to say, for European competitiveness. In this context, at the Barcelona Council of March 2002, the heads of state and government called for improving the mastery of basic skills, “in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age”. The exclusive focus on the official languages of the Union was dropped. In fact, the adoption of the Lisbon agenda marked the beginning of the development of an inclusive language education policy, linked to the lifelong learning paradigm.

Let me just remind you of the first two key competences for lifelong learning set out in the Parliament's and the Council's Recommendation of December 2006.

- **communication in the mother tongue**, which is the ability to express and interpret concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions in both oral and written form (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and to interact linguistically in an appropriate and creative way in a full range of societal and cultural contexts;
- **communication in foreign languages**, which involves, in addition to the main skill dimensions of communication in the mother tongue, mediation and intercultural

understanding. The level of proficiency depends on several factors and the capacity for listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Since the turn of the century, and especially in the past five years, the social landscape of Europe has changed radically as a result of the following and related developments:

- globalization
- internationalization in many fields of human activity, including enterprise, higher education and research
- the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007
- the continuing revitalization of regions, including cross-border regions, at least partly in response to globalisation
- increasing intra-European mobility and intra-European trade
- migration into the Union
- major advances in communications technology
- the creation of a European Higher Education Area and of a European Research Area

These developments have transformed the linguistic and cultural fabric of European societies, as well as individual language profiles and language use.

Today, all EU Member States, in fact, all countries in Europe are multilingual and multicultural societies. Across Europe, several hundred languages are spoken and used: official EU languages, other official European languages, regional European languages, and non-European languages – referred to as migrant languages and languages of the wider world, as the case may be. A significant number of people in Europe, including children and young people in formal education, only have a limited command of the language of the region or country where they reside. Moreover, roughly one quarter of all 15-year-olds living in the Union is practically illiterate. At the same time, a new generation is emerging of young multilingual people who have two or even three first languages, but are not necessarily fully literate in both or all of them. And while it is true that that more languages are spoken in Europe today than ever before, it is equally true that more English is now spoken in Europe than at any time in the past.

Through these developments, the multilingual challenge present in the EU has reached a completely new dimension – in terms of size, complexity, and policy relevance. Nowhere is this more clearly visible than in interlingual and intercultural communication. Whereas this was formerly primarily seen in terms of interpersonal exchanges between people residing in different Member States, it is now a major issue at organizational, local, regional, Member State and international level.

It is probably also fair to say that language education policies and practices across Member States – and in some cases within Member States – are now rather diverse. Admittedly,

responsibility for education rests with the Member States or regions in Member States, or with autonomous institutions of tertiary education. However, the question has to be addressed as to whether it is, all the same, possible – and desirable - to define common objectives, or at least common reference points for language competence and language learning that meet the complexity of the multilingual challenge Europe is confronted with today.

Allow me to single out a few “challenges”.

At EU level, we have a regulatory framework according to which – broadly speaking - EU citizens have the right to live and work in any one of the Member States. In fact, it is a declared policy of the EU – spelt out in Europe 2020 - to encourage Europeans to exercise this right. Of course, trans-European mobility was not invented by the EU. At around 1900, my grandfather and his brothers left Toruń – admittedly at that time part of Prussia – and moved to Berlin, determined to stay there for the rest of their lives – which they did. They immediately decided to drop their Polish language and to learn and use German only; they even gave themselves German names. Today, it is perfectly normal for young families to move to another Member State where another language is spoken, and is the language of schooling. If all goes well, the children of such mobile families will be able to acquire competence in the language of the host nation or region through pre-school and school education. However, what happens to their first language or languages? What can be done to ensure the maintenance and further development of this language or these languages? And what happens to the children language wise if their parents decide to return to their countries of origin or move on to other countries? Children should have the right and be able to achieve literacy in the first language or languages, and full competence in the language of education (if different); and they should have the right to continue the learning of other languages from an early age. Admittedly, parents may well have other ideas. But the rights I have spoken about are directly linked to the lifelong learning paradigm, and they make sense from a social and economic point of view.

Of course, there are limits as to what our education systems and institutions can do to deliver more adequately on the new multilingual challenge – and I have not even mentioned the children of migrant families. But that does not mean that Member States should not regard it as their duty to make every effort to align the language provision in formal and non-formal education as far as possible to the diverse linguistic repertoires of their pupils and students.

It is becoming increasingly common for children and young people to learn languages in informal and non-formal settings. Electronically mediated communication and the media have a key role in this respect. Of course, it is unlikely that learning of this kind will result in full competence in the language or languages in question. There is a school of socio-linguistics that believes that this does not matter. Members of this school also claim on the

basis of empirical research findings that children and young people tend to mix the languages they have in communication with their peers – “multilingualism” is the new magic word. What I have personally observed is that young people tend to exploit the fact that many of our European languages are interrelated. For example, they engage in inter-comprehension. Moreover, as our national borders become less relevant, for many young people the systemic differences between related languages become less significant. Be that as it may, it is becoming increasingly important to improve systems and mechanisms designed to recognize language proficiency acquired through informal and non-formal learning. This, too, has to do with lifelong learning.

It was probably never meant to be like this – but the 1+2 formula does not put sufficient emphasis on the dynamic nature of multilingualism. Different contexts require different linguistic repertoires and levels of competence. For example, it may well be the case that the corporate language of a company or the language of instruction of a higher education programme is English. In that case, workers and students will have to have a high level of competence in English, including in writing in English. In addition, however, workers and students for whom the local language is a foreign language will have to learn that language to a proficiency level that facilitates social integration.

In other words, when we speak of linguistic competences relevant to the development of European society, we have to recognize that these competences have to be seen in terms of dynamic repertoires, subject to continuous development in line with the lifelong learning paradigm – be it that a language which is part of a given individual repertoire has to be further developed in response to changing needs, be it that a new language needs to be added to the repertoire.

Another aspect of this dynamic linguistic competence is ability for self-assessment. People have to be able to assess their linguistic competence or competences in relation to specific requirements – their strengths and weaknesses – and to take remedial action. Needless to say, people may also decide to learn another language for purely personal reasons.

Finally, it stands to reason that technology will become ever more important for language learning and language use. Pupils and students have to be prepared for this.

To put it differently – familiarity with relevant technological tools, and ability to exploit technological tools for language learning and language use constitute yet another facet of linguistic competence relevant to life and work in present-day European society.

It should be clear from what I have said so far that the kind of dynamic multilingual competence I have in mind is important for all people living in the Union, and that it is relevant to employability, competitiveness, social cohesion, citizenship, cultural awareness and personal development.

It should also be clear that there can be no firm recommendations as regards language choice. I sometimes wonder whether one of the considerations underlying the original 1+2 formula was perhaps an anxiety that English might become the unofficial common language of the Union, and French, which had enjoyed that status in Brussels before the 1995 expansion, might sink into oblivion. Be that as it may, there are academics and other important players that are still fighting this battle.

Believe me – I am a firm advocate of societal and individual multilingualism, but I also hold the view that a given context may determine language choice, and anyway – that at EU events, every EU citizen has the right to use an official language of his choice – a language in which she or he feels comfortable, and which is understood by the audience or for which interpretation is available.

Last Wednesday, I attended a meeting at the German representation to the EU organised by the German Academic Exchange Service. The director of DG EAC's Directorate C – Lifelong learning, higher education and international affairs - talked in some detail about how the Commission was seeking to promote the internationalization of higher education in the EU. Needless to say, before long, questions were asked about the linguistic implications of this strategy. Was it all going to be done in Globish?

I shall be very brief on this one, because the CEL/ELC's honorary member Régis Ritz will later be talking about university language policy. At this stage, I should only like to tell you one or two things about my own university – Freie Universität Berlin. Yes – many of our masters and PhD programmes in internationalized disciplines are taught in English – what else could we do? But Freie Universität Berlin being the highly international institution that it is, you will hardly hear a word of German or English spoken when you walk down the main corridor of my building. That said, our German masters and PhD students are constantly reminded of the fact that when it comes to their academic output, they have to be able to write and publish in English and German – in other words, they have to be biliterate. I also understand, however, that universities based in countries or regions whose languages are not among the traditional languages of science may well see things differently. At a recent strategy meeting of the CEL/ELC Board, a member from a university of this kind told us that for her and her colleagues the formula was now English + ....

Before I conclude, allow me to return to the issue of illiteracy. Right now, we are confronted with the situation that a substantial percentage of young people living in the Union can neither read nor write properly. Maybe you won't believe this, but in the recent election campaign in the land of Berlin, the main political parties published their programmes in two languages – German and German light, the latter of which I could not understand. Speaking personally, I think we have to make sure that everyone living in this our Union is fully competent in at least one language. Why am I saying this?

Take, for example, the Federal Republic of Germany. According to a recent report, 7.5 million young people living in that country are illiterate. At the same time, politicians say that they have to attract skilled labour from other parts of the world. Maybe building linguistic competence and competences should start nearer home – we have to make a determined effort to make sure that we are not allowing our European societies to become socially divisive.

I think I have spoken far too long. I can only hope that I have given you some food for thought.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION.