

# The Modern Languages Projects of the Council of Europe [Table of contents](#) and the development of language policy [en français](#)

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This article provides a summary of Council of Europe language policy, which has evolved over three decades of work in the area of modern languages in Strasbourg. It also presents in outline the results of recent medium term projects involving countries party to the European Cultural Convention (currently 47 states). The European Year of Languages 2001 provides a special occasion to highlight key policy issues and the role of planning instruments and recent initiatives for policy development.

## Policy

Council of Europe language policy is primarily concerned with:

- Access to language learning opportunities as a right for ALL
- The development of individual plurilingualism and pluriculturalism
- Europe's linguistic heritage as a source of enrichment.

## *Access*

Language learning is for ALL; it cannot be the preserve of any social or intellectual elite in a Europe that is and will remain multilingual and multicultural. The arguments are widely accepted: communication skills in other languages and cultures can reduce the risk of prejudice and intolerance by developing deeper understanding and acceptance of the different ways of life and forms of thought of other peoples; full participation in democratic processes requires competence in the languages of other partners; language skills are essential for improved employment opportunities and access to information in an age of globalisation. Therefore, for reasons of cultural flexibility, equality and social integration, democratic citizenship and economic opportunity, the possibility for everybody to learn other languages is not only a necessity but also even a human right.

## *Plurilingualism and pluriculturalism*

The aim of language learning is to develop individual plurilingualism and pluriculturalism. The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe addressed a Recommendation to member states in 1998 to promote widespread plurilingualism "by encouraging all Europeans to achieve a degree of communicative ability in a number of languages".<sup>[1]</sup> This definition means that the goal is not mastery of several languages but some worthwhile communicative ability in at least two other languages. This is based on the premise that different languages can be learned to different levels of proficiency as they may be needed or can be used for different purposes. The goal of native speaker competence is replaced by that of the "intercultural speaker", able to mediate between different cultures and social groups.

The Recommendation also stressed the importance of diversifying the range of languages that can be learned in education systems. In order to facilitate this diversity it recommended that flexible programmes be introduced which could include modular courses and the recognition of "partial" competences in certificates (e.g. reading and listening skills).

Plurilingualism involves not only communicative ability in other languages. It also requires an awareness of and respect for languages and speakers of other languages. It is important, therefore, to help citizens to develop an awareness of the multilingual nature of Europe and the world and this is one of the aims of the European Year of Languages 2001. It is equally important to help them become

more aware of and to value their own plurilingual identity as individuals, whether this comes from learning at school or from their home, or from the environment in which they live. This is one of the aims of a European Language Portfolio (see below). An individual's identity is made up of many components, including language. Identity is not static and unchanging but evolves and becomes enriched through new experiences throughout an individual's life, including the learning of other languages. In this context linguistic diversity is seen not a barrier but as a potential source of enrichment which contributes to the development of an "open and multiple identity".

### ***Linguistic diversity***

The member states of the Council of Europe are home to over two hundred indigenous languages and are further enriched by the presence of several hundred languages used by migrant communities in their multilingual cities. Most countries operate with more than one language and for many people bilingualism is the norm. It is important in this European Year of Languages to try to increase understanding of Europe's rich linguistic heritage and of the need to actively promote what are often referred to as the less widely used languages.

### **Policy instruments for linguistic diversity and plurilingualism**

The Council of Europe's activities are concerned both with language use and language teaching and learning. Two normative instruments in particular deal with language use: the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities - see websites for further information.[2]

Other instruments described below deal specifically with the promotion of linguistic diversity in language teaching and learning and have no normative role. They are designed to provide guidance and support in developing and implementing language policy to promote improved and more diversified language learning. These are mainly addressed to policy deciders and the language profession and include: descriptive tools such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages or specifications of learning objectives for specific languages ("Threshold" and related levels); analytical tools such as the Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies currently being developed. While these are extremely influential they affect the learner only indirectly. More recently a personal document for learners has been introduced - the European Language Portfolio. These instruments are briefly presented below.

### ***Common European Framework of Reference for Languages***

The Framework "describes in a comprehensive way what learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively. The description also covers the cultural context in which language is set. The Framework also defines levels of proficiency that allow learners' progress to be measured at each stage of learning and on a lifelong basis".[3]

The Framework is a descriptive document and does not provide policy guidelines. It aims to encourage reflection and communication about all aspects of language learning, teaching and assessment. It provides a common basis and language for the elaboration of curricula, syllabuses, textbooks, examinations and teacher training programmes across Europe. The Framework can facilitate coherence and transparency in the description of objectives, content and methods so that all the partners involved can reflect on and co-ordinate their efforts in the interests of learners. As it also provides objective criteria for describing language proficiency the Framework can serve as a calibration instrument for the equation of examinations and qualifications. By facilitating the mutual recognition of qualifications awarded in different contexts it will aid European mobility.

### ***Level descriptions for specific languages***

While the Framework is a non-language specific tool, there is a need for a complementary instrument that provides an explicit learning objective for communication in specific languages. The Council of Europe has developed a series of specifications of learning objectives which set out in detail "what users of a specific language are most likely to wish or need to be able to do in the communicative situations in which they take part, and consequently what they have to know and the skills they have

to develop in order to be able to communicate effectively in those situations".**[4]** The approach is based on "maximal exploitation of minimal means".

The "Threshold Level" is the central element that aims to identify the minimal linguistic means that are necessary for a learner to deal independently with the more predictable transactional and interactional situations of daily life as a visitor or temporary resident. A more elementary learning objective known as "Waystage" has been developed to deal with the most urgent survival requirements. More recently "Vantage Level" has been produced as an objective for learners who have reached "Threshold Level" in their chosen language and wish to go further. This may mean not so much doing completely new things as needing to do them in a more adequate way, for example, with a greater range of vocabulary, more fluency and accuracy to deal with the complexities of daily life.

A single model has been used for these three successive levels, which allows for a flexible approach to adapting them to specific learning contexts and requirements. For example, extra stages can be introduced to create smaller more achievable steps to assist motivation, and the elements can be supplemented or reduced to meet specific needs. These conceptual tools have been instrumental in planning and implementing language teaching based on desirable, appropriate and feasible objectives. Specifications have been developed to date for almost thirty national or regional languages, and others are in preparation.

### ***European Language Portfolio***

Recommendation No (98) 6 of the Committee of Ministers concerning Modern Languages asks member states to "encourage the development and use by learners in all educational sectors of a personal document (European Language Portfolio) in which they can record their qualifications and other significant linguistic and cultural experiences in an internationally transparent manner, thus motivating learners and acknowledging their efforts to extend and diversify their language learning at all levels in a lifelong perspective" (op.cit.).

A pilot scheme was carried out (1998-2000) to test the feasibility of the Portfolio in different educational contexts.**[5]** The successful outcome of this initial scheme led to a Resolution of the Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education (20th Session, Cracow, October 2000) supporting the widespread introduction of a Portfolio in member states in accordance with national language policies.**[6]** This dissemination process is now beginning and the idea has been enthusiastically taken up in all sectors of education.

The Portfolio has both a reporting and a pedagogic function and consists of three related parts: Language Passport, Language Biography, and Dossier. The reporting function allows the holder to present information in the Language Passport in summary form about his/her main linguistic and cultural experiences and proficiency at a given time in relation to the common levels in the Framework. Both formal qualifications and competences at any level acquired within or outside formal contexts (self-assessment) can be recorded and placed in relation to the common European scale. A standard version is available for older learners to facilitate mobility. This is not intended to replace but to complement formal certificates.

The Language Biography shows the learners' experiences and achievements for each language in more detail. The emphasis is on the pedagogic function as the learner can use this part to focus on the learning process (planning, reflecting, assessing progress). The Language Biography is a flexible part which can be easily adapted to the specific requirements of the learning context. The learner can collect examples of achievements in the Dossier and link these to the entries in the other two parts. Other relevant material such as information on syllabuses or examination criteria can also be kept here.

The Council of Europe has developed the portfolio as an instrument to motivate and support learners in developing plurilingualism at all stages of learning. It is hoped that it will help to promote more diversified language learning, enhance the quality of learning and facilitate lifelong learning. Standard guidelines and common principles have been approved to ensure quality and coherence in the development of a European Language Portfolio across Europe. Versions are being developed in many

countries to meet local needs and also by international NGOs according to the agreed criteria for three different stages: young learners, secondary school and adults. The procedure requires that draft portfolios be submitted to a European Validation Committee in Strasbourg for examination. Approval gives the right to use a special Council of Europe logo. Further information and supporting documentation can be obtained from the website <http://culture.coe.int/portfolio>.

### ***Guide for the development of language education policies in Europe***

Work is currently in progress on a Guide offering approaches to the analysis of multilingualism and the elaboration of language education policies appropriate to given geographic areas. Consequently, it will not be a statement of policy as such but will facilitate the development of policies that promote and maintain the concept of linguistic diversity.

The Guide will deal with linguistic diversity both as "multilingualism" (the presence of more than one language in a given geographical area) and plurilingualism (the repertoire of languages which an individual may use - including "mother tongue"/"first language", "second", "minority" and "foreign" languages). It will: analyse current policy trends in European countries; present ways of identifying and analysing the (linguistic and non-linguistic) factors in a given geographical area necessary as a preliminary to developing an appropriate policy for diversity; and describe the range of technical forms of organisation of language education which policy developers can draw upon in the implementation of their policies.

The Guide will be piloted in use beginning in 2002 and along with other existing instruments will be used in a series of national language education policy reviews to be undertaken at the request of member states.

### **Conclusion**

This article has attempted to provide a very brief overview of some current work of the Modern Languages Division of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg which is responsible primarily for the development of language policy. Its work is complemented by the activities of the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz, which deals with implementation aspects, and in particular the practice of language teaching and dissemination of good practice.

The Modern Languages Division is co-ordinating the European Year of Languages 2001 which presents a unique once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to place debate on language policy at the centre of our reflections on the kind of Europe we wish to develop. Our policy work, particularly at the present time, aims to promote the development of language policies that are not simply dictated by economic considerations, but take full account of social inclusion, stability, democratic citizenship and linguistic rights. The promotion of linguistic diversity and opportunities for language learning are an issue of human rights and democratic citizenship on a European scale. The European Year of Languages 2001 should serve as a catalyst for the further development of language policies based on these fundamental concepts, and this will be the main focus of a new medium-term programme to be launched in Strasbourg in spring 2002.

(The views expressed in this article do not commit the Council of Europe).

### **Notes**

**[1]** Recommendation No. R (98) 6 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States concerning Modern Languages (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 17 March 1998, at the 623rd meeting of the Ministers' Deputies).

Recommandation N° R (98) 6 du Comité des Ministres aux Etats Membres concernant les Langues vivantes (adoptée par le Comité des Ministres le 17 mars 1998, lors de la 623e réunion des Délégués des Ministres).

**[2]** European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages  
<http://conventions.coe.int/treaty/en/Treaties/Html/148.htm>

Charte européenne des langues régionales ou minoritaires  
<http://conventions.coe.int/treaty/fr/Treaties/Html/148.htm>

Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities  
<http://conventions.coe.int/treaty/en/Treaties/Html/157.htm>

Convention-cadre pour la protection des minorités nationales  
<http://conventions.coe.int/treaty/fr/Treaties/Html/157.htm>

**[3]** Council of Europe (2001) *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*, Cambridge University Press/Council of Europe.

Conseil de l'Europe (2001) *Cadre européen commun de référence pour les langues: apprendre, enseigner, évaluer*, Didier/Conseil de l'Europe.

**[4]** Van Ek, J.A. and J.L.M. Trim (2001) *Vantage*, Cambridge University Press/Council of Europe.

**[5]** Schärer, R. (2001) *European Language Portfolio: Final report on the pilot project*, Council of Europe.

Schärer, R. (2001) *Portfolio européen des langues, Rapport final du Projet pilote*, Conseil de l'Europe.

**[6]** Council of Europe (2000) *Education Policies for Democratic Citizenship and Social Cohesion: Challenges and Strategies for Europe* (20th Session of the Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education), Adopted texts.

Conseil de l'Europe (2000) *Politiques éducatives pour la citoyenneté démocratique et la cohésion sociale : enjeux et stratégies pour l'Europe* (20e Session de la Conférence permanente des Ministres européens de l'Education), textes adoptés.