

## **Plurilingual and intercultural competences – two elements of a single European language policy**

Foreign language teaching in Europe is closely related to the political and social evolution of Europe. As is well known there is a political entity called the European Union of 27 states, and citizens of those states are also European citizens with the right to vote for a European parliament as well as their national parliament.

There is also a larger organisation – the Council of Europe – which is an association of 47 states based on conventions which stress the common European heritage of culture, the rule of law and democracy. This is not a political entity and citizens do not vote for it but it has a strong influence through the conventions and agreements on the acts and activities of governments, and through the European Court of Human Rights on the acts and activities of individuals.

Both of these organisations are interested in creating a more unified Europe whose inhabitants will identify with Europe as a whole as well as with their own nations and states.

One of the effects of all this has been much increased mobility of Europeans who seek work and homes in other European countries. There has also been much immigration from outside Europe – especially from Africa – of other people seeking work and homes.

However the hope of unity in Europe and identification with Europe, and the practicalities of seeking work in another country meet the barrier of the many languages which exist. There are 23 official languages in the EU but there are many more state languages in the Council of Europe, and hundreds of minority languages. If people are to work and live together and to identify with a common European heritage, they need to be able to communicate. This is why language teaching is crucial policy for Europe, and this is why the Council of Europe more than 40 years ago started projects on language teaching.

The major outcome of these projects – but not the only one – has been the *Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR)*. This is a book which describes and discusses the language competences people need to live and work together. It does so in a way which creates a common way of thinking about how languages are taught and learnt. For just as there are many countries there are also many ways of teaching languages and yet there needs to be mutual understanding of the methods and the outcomes and how the proficiency of learners can be improved and measured.

The CEFR describes language competences needed in Europe in terms of plurilingual and intercultural competence. Plurilingual competence refers to the capacities for languages people have and to the way in which languages are ‘stored’ in the mind and used in social interaction. The important innovation of the CEFR is to show how languages can be used for everyday living and how teaching and assessment take this into account. It does this by a stress on what learners ‘can do’ with their language competences and on measuring what they ‘can do’. This means that they do not have to be perfect or try to imitate native speakers in order to be assessed positively as having competence in languages and how to use them appropriately.

The CEFR also recognises that successful interaction with people of other languages is not just a matter of linguistic competence for exchanging information. It also involves intercultural competence i.e. the ability to understand other people’s ways of living and thinking and how these may be implicit in what they say. Full communication – and not just exchange of information – depends on intercultural as well as plurilingual competence. The CEFR describes this competence too although it does not describe in the same detail and does not deal with methods of teaching and assessment. There has been however since the CEFR was published 7 years ago much work on intercultural competence and I will briefly explain what this means and how the Council of Europe is developing work on ‘Intercultural Dialogue’ as described in a recent White Paper on this topic.

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