

LIFELONG FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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The new political dimension of lifelong learning and language learning

Lifelong learning and language learning have, for many years now, been major components of EU education policy. Lifelong learning and language learning were explicitly combined in the fourth objective of the Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the European Year of Languages:

to encourage the lifelong learning of languages, where appropriate, starting at preschool and primary school age and related skills involving the use of languages for specific purposes, particularly in a professional context by all persons residing in the Member States, whatever their age, background, social situation and previous educational experience and achievements

The wording of the objective reflects the new political dimension that was added to EU policy on education and training by the Presidency Conclusions of the Lisbon Council of March 2000. The Council identified two new challenges confronting the Union and people living in the Union: globalisation and the advent of a knowledge-driven economy. The Council argued that the Union had to respond to this challenge by setting itself a clear strategic goal for the first decade of the 21st century: "to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world". The Council argued that the new challenges and the strategic goal required a radical transformation of the European economy, which in turn called for, among other things, the modernisation of education and training systems. The Council felt that this new drive in the field of education should have three main components:

- the development of multi-purpose local learning centres accessible to all and addressing a wide range of target groups
- the development of a European framework defining the new basic skills to be provided through lifelong learning
- greater transparency in the recognition of qualifications and periods of study and training

As will become clear in the course of my presentation, these components are of direct relevance to lifelong language learning. It is particularly noteworthy that 'foreign languages' were included among the new basic skills identified to be provided and acquired through lifelong learning. There is some logic in this. If the Union is to achieve its strategic goal, the European labour market and the European economy will have to become much more integrated, mobility will have to increase, and contacts with third countries intensified. These developments require proficiency in a number of languages of practically all people in Europe. Whereas in the past, it was possible exclusively to relate basic literacy skills to the mother tongue(s), in the European Union, which is being created as a multilingual society and which sees itself operating in a global context, literacy must needs mean multiliteracy.

In the follow-up to Lisbon, the Education Council produced a *Report on the Concrete Future Objectives of Education and Training Systems*, which was adopted by the European Council in Stockholm in March 2001. The following objectives set out in the *Report* are particularly relevant to the issue of lifelong language learning:

- education and training systems must adapt to the requirements of lifelong learning and be accessible for all citizens
- foreign language learning must be improved for Europe to achieve its economic, cultural and social potential

In other words, the Member States acknowledged that lifelong learning in general and language learning in particular are essential to the future of the Union and that they themselves have to see to it that

pertinent measures are put in place; the seriousness of the Council's intentions was evidenced by the fact that they thought it would be necessary to define indicators for measuring the achievement of the various objectives. The Stockholm Council also placed particular emphasis on 'improving basic skills'. It charged the Education Council and the Commission with drawing up a detailed work plan for the elaboration and implementation of the objectives set out in the *Objectives Report*. What has since come to be known as the Objectives Process was now well underway.

The Conclusions of the Barcelona Council in March this year show an even firmer commitment to improving education and training systems in the Union, to facilitating universal access to lifelong learning opportunities and to boosting language teaching; they strengthened the educational dimension of the strategic goal set at the Lisbon Council by explicitly stating 'the objective of making [the Union's] educative and training systems a world quality reference by 2010'. For the first time, the Council subscribed to the Commission's 1+>2 formula, prioritising languages among the basic skills: 'to improve the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age'. It also called for the establishment of a linguistic competence indicator in 2003. The Barcelona Council adopted the objectives work plan prepared by the Education Council and the Commission, which defines key issues for each objective in education and training and spells out the organisation of the follow up. In regard to languages, the work plan places emphasis on improving teaching and teacher training. The indicators mentioned for measuring progress include the 'percentage of pupils and students who reach a level of proficiency in two foreign languages', which, in a footnote, is made even more concrete: 'for instance to level B2 of the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference'. The work plan also foresees an exchange of experience and good practice in regard to 'methods and ways of organising the teaching of languages', 'early language teaching', and 'ways of promoting the learning of languages'. Either later this year or early next year, a working group devoted to the objective 'improving foreign language learning' will be convened.

I have spent some time outlining the Objectives Process because I think that what has happened over the past two years is of tremendous importance for education and training in general and for language learning in particular. Never before have the Member States placed such great emphasis on education and training, never before have they expressed such firm commitment to the learning of languages. Not so long ago, the Council could not even agree on the minimum number of languages EU citizens should learn; now they have not only done that, but they have also agreed to set a minimum level of proficiency that EU citizens should acquire. In the Union of the 21st century, people who do not know other languages are in danger of becoming regarded as illiterate.

In stressing the new political dimension of the knowledge of foreign languages, I do not, of course, wish to belittle the general educational value of lifelong language learning, i.e. its importance for personal development, for understanding other cultures, and for enabling people to make full use of the rights conferred by citizenship of the Union. What I wanted to draw attention to is the fact that the Member States sitting in Council have come to realise that economic and social progress require multiliterate Union citizens, and that because of this language learning in the Union has received a new sense of urgency.

Lifelong learning in the European Union – a framework of reference

The policies on and principles of lifelong learning currently being discussed and propagated at a European level are set out in the Commission's Communication of November 2001 entitled *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality*. Lifelong learning is defined as "all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills, and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective." Whereas in the past, lifelong learning has often been associated with learning taking place after compulsory or even tertiary education, it is now defined in a broader way, covering all learning from pre-school to post-retirement. Pre-school and

primary school are considered to be particularly relevant to lifelong learning, having a potential for reducing inequalities later on and for laying a solid basis for further learning. The success of lifelong learning very much depends on learners' actively seeking to acquire and develop knowledge and competences, and the foundations for this have to be laid as early as pre-primary stage; it is at this stage that children should learn how to learn.

Lifelong learning is associated with a democratisation of learning. The lifelong learning strategies proposed by the Commission include (i) making quality learning opportunities accessible for all, on an ongoing basis; (ii) making traditional systems more open and flexible, so that learners can have individual pathways, suitable to their needs and interests; (iii) increasing learning opportunities; (iv) raising participation levels; (v) stimulating demand for learning.

The following principles would seem to be particularly relevant to the lifelong learning aspect of language learning:

- lifelong learning encompasses the whole spectrum of learning, including learning outside formal educational settings;
- lifelong learning requires a new pedagogy, i.e. a shift in emphasis from knowledge acquisition to competence development as well as a shift from teaching to learning, i.e. from input to output; what matters is the competences, not how they have been acquired;
- lifelong learning requires a new culture of learning, notably the development of learning communities, cities and regions and the establishment of local multifunctional learning centres, linked to the Internet;
- lifelong learning requires concerted action on the part of all stakeholders, including the learners themselves: local authorities, schools, universities, other learning providers and related services, research centres, enterprises, public employment services etc.; this, in turn, requires a shift in attitude on the part of all providers of education, who have to cater for a variety of target groups and interact with other providers in the field;
- the quality of provision very much depends on the quality of teachers and of teacher education.

Financial considerations apart, perhaps the principal challenge in the lifelong learning scenario presented by the Commission is that of validation. If people are to combine and build on learning from school, universities, training bodies, work, leisure time, and family activities, there has to be a structure in place which provides for the identification, assessment and recognition of all forms of learning – and all this across the Union. In other words, what is needed is a framework supporting the overall transfer of qualifications and competences between levels of education and training and across institutional, sectoral, and national borders. Both providers of education and employers across Europe – as well as citizens themselves – have to be able to interpret the competences and qualifications held by citizens irrespective of how and where they were acquired. A decision will have to be made at EU level on what kind of enabling instrument should be created and introduced – a portfolio system, or a certification system, or a mixed system. Whatever the decision will be – knowledge, skills, and competences will have to be presented in a way that shows their relevance to life and work in the Union.

Lifelong language learning in the European Union – what are the requirements?

Language learning at pre-primary and primary level

Languages are regarded by many pupils as difficult subjects; they are often dropped and avoided. At the same time, most of us know cases of small children learning other languages in a seemingly natural way alongside their mother tongue. It is this kind of observation, which is supported by scientific evidence, that is behind the propagation of early language learning and teaching by the EU and the renewed trend towards early language teaching in EU Member States documented in the Eurydice study *Foreign Language Teaching in Schools in Europe*. Early language teaching/learning is also expected to generate a positive attitude not just to other languages, but to things foreign and to

foreigners in general; it is hoped that early language teaching will instil interest in other languages in children and generate a lasting motivation to learn other languages.

The experimental introduction of early language teaching in the sixties and early seventies did not always produce the expected results, and more recent and widespread endeavours have not always been encouraging either. The review *Foreign Languages in Primary and Pre-School education: Context and Outcomes* supported by the LINGUA strand of the SOCRATES programme identified a number of interrelated conditions that must be created if early language teaching is to have the positive effects expected. Among these are (i) parental involvement, (ii) pedagogical continuity between pre-primary, primary and secondary sectors, (iii) properly trained teachers, who have the necessary linguistic and pedagogical skills, (iv) daily contact with the foreign language and a high quality of lessons, and (v) the development and introduction of methods appropriate for young children. I believe that properly prepared and highly motivated teachers are the most important factor in the early language teaching scenario. But then this is true for language teaching at all stages.

The authors of the study mentioned above express the opinion that there is a danger that an early start to foreign language learning will reduce diversity. To be sure, in the Member State where I happen to reside – and the same is true for other Member States also -, early language teaching is almost exclusively limited to English and French, with French being offered much less widely. This is a pity because young children neither care about the ‘status’ of a language nor do they seem to regard specific languages as more difficult than others. My three-and-a-half-year-old nephew Oscar, who is growing up in a German-speaking environment in Berlin and has a Polish *kindermädchen*, delights in singing Polish songs and in sporting Polish words and phrases. He is even able to reflect on differences in pronunciation between Polish and German. This would seem to indicate that if we want to do something for diversifying language learning, we have to start doing so at pre-primary and primary level; it would certainly be another reason why we must encourage and facilitate teacher mobility in the Union.

When I talked about general principles and strategies of lifelong learning, I said that it was important that as early as primary level, pupils should learn how to learn. Anecdotal evidence leads me to believe that early language teaching – at least in my part of the world – often fails on this important point – not because it is wrong in principle, but because it is implemented inadequately. How else could one explain the fact that so many children in grades 3 and 4 are required to have private tutoring in order not to fall behind. Clearly, for these children language learning is not fun. Maybe we should reflect again on what the aims and objectives of foreign language provision in primary schools should be, i.e. what language skills and competences pupils should have acquired by the end of fifth grade.

I cannot leave the pre-primary and primary level without stressing the fact that early language learning has impacts throughout the rest of the school system – or, at least, can and should have. If children start learning a specific language earlier, they can have mastered it by early or mid-secondary, and have therefore freed-up some time in the secondary curriculum for other languages. Also, schools can then start to use the language in question for teaching other subjects.

Language learning at secondary level

It is generally acknowledged that during the period of puberty young people tend to lack motivation to learn languages. This is one of the reasons why language teaching and learning have a particularly hard time in countries where language teaching does not set in until secondary level. But even where early language teaching is now the rule, special efforts are required to ensure that pupils maintain interest in languages, linguistic skills and other cultures. Far too often, pupils come to associate languages with academic failure, with a relentless marking of errors; far too rarely do they experience their linguistic skills, however limited these may be, as something relevant. This is why bilingual or multilingual education is so important; this is why school partnerships including Internet links need to be promoted; this is why the language resource of the Internet, which has become conspicuously multilingual over the past few years, needs to be exploited; this is why extracurricular language clubs can often achieve more

than formal teaching. Also, independent learning and co-operative learning, keys to much of post-secondary language learning, have to be introduced and promoted at this level. Secondary schools need to systematically develop and maintain a foreign language ethos, which lifts language learning above the level of rote learning and role play. There needs to be a clearer correlation between learning outcomes and the future needs of the individual and European society

The EU rightly emphasises the importance of real and virtual mobility for language learning. Many parents who can afford to do so send their children abroad, where they live in a host family and attend school. This normally generates a lot of enthusiasm both for the language and the culture of the host country. In many cases this sojourn is the beginning of a series of lengthy visits to foreign countries, during which languages are primarily learnt in non-formal settings. It would be good if individual mobility at secondary level were to be promoted in structured ways. It would also be good if schools were to make a greater effort to validate and recognise language ability acquired during stays abroad or elsewhere outside the school curriculum.

In sum, I would argue that secondary school is an important stage in the process of lifelong language learning and that the context of language learning needs to be improved and to be made more relevant both within and beyond schools. If we do not succeed in doing so, it will be difficult to motivate pupils who do not go on to tertiary education to maintain and expand the skills and competences acquired at school once they have left school..

Language learning in tertiary and adult education

It is a sad reflection on the state of much of language teaching and learning in secondary school that in many Member States the very same students that neglected or dropped languages at school queue up for languages at university - very often for the same languages they were taught at school. It is encouraging, however, that in my own University more and more students also want to learn languages not normally offered at school. It cannot be stressed too often that higher education institutions have major responsibilities and duties for the promotion of lifelong language learning – responsibilities and duties that are not always properly understood by them. For example, many universities still do not offer all of their students in undergraduate education the opportunity to take a number of credits in languages. Although student mobility has become an accepted part of university life, the provision of linguistic and intercultural preparation and support for mobility is often insufficient. Also, linguistic skills and competences acquired during study or placement abroad or, indeed, in other non-university contexts are rarely validated and recognised. Very often universities have unclear ideas of the learning outcomes to be achieved through their language programmes and offerings.

While there is evidence that an increasingly large number of students in adult education are interested in maintaining or expanding their linguistic repertoire, employers across Europe do not as yet fully share the EU's view of the importance of foreign languages. In a recent survey conducted as part of the pilot project *Tuning Educational Structures in Europe* employers were asked to rank 30 given competences. To be sure, 'knowledge of a second language' was included among the competences regarded as highly important, but it came bottom of the list of the 23 competences included in this category. (The authors of the study do not seem to have regarded 'knowledge of a third language' as a competence worth being included in the survey.) Worse, the following competences were given low priority: ability to work in an international environment; appreciation of diversity and multiculturalism; understanding of cultures and customs of other countries. It seems that the respondents were not fully aware of the educational implications of an increasingly integrated European labour market.

However good the quality of language learning at school may have been, the linguistic skills and competences acquired will not remain at the level achieved unless they are actively maintained and consolidated. Also, it is to be expected that the linguistic demands made on adults will increase in

quantitative and qualitative terms as the European labour market becomes more integrated – in other words, higher levels of proficiency and more languages. The languages you learn at school may not be the ones you need for your job or for other purposes later in life. What this means is that language learning should not, cannot stop at the end of compulsory general education. If we want to achieve a breakthrough in this respect, we shall have to find ways of raising people's awareness of the importance of foreign languages and of motivating them to continue learning languages, and we shall have to make sure that everyone has access to quality language learning opportunities. A rather tall order!

Clearly, there are considerable differences between Member States both in terms of people's motivation to learn languages and of the provision available. In some of the Member States, notably in those whose official languages are among the most widely spoken in Europe, people do not seem to be terribly motivated to learn other languages; foreign books are available in translation; foreign-language films are dubbed. When it comes to other languages, English seems to be enough. What, then, can be done to motivate adults actively to maintain their foreign languages and to learn new languages, among them less widely taught and used languages? I would hope that the evaluation of the activities undertaken within the EYL2001 initiative will provide some inspiration. Quite frankly, I do not think that people will get terribly excited if we tell them that the Union is being erected on the principle of linguistic and cultural diversity. People have to experience this diversity as something exciting and relevant, like foreign restaurants, for example. I, for one, believe that the media can and must play a key role in this respect. In Berlin, I can watch Bavarian television; I can also watch TV5 and BBC World. Why can't I watch channels from other Member States? New technology should make this possible. In Germany, quality papers regularly print columns from foreign papers – in German. Why don't they start publishing these excerpts in the original languages as well as in translation? People spend more time abroad than ever before. There are now English and German pockets in southern European countries. How can we convince people that their holidays in southern Europe would be that much more enjoyable and, yes, rewarding if they knew the local language? Ultimately, what can be done to keep languages in the public eye, to make the linguistic diversity of our Union part of people's everyday experience?

In addition, there is the issue of the benefits of language learning. If foreign languages are to be treated as basic skills, they have to figure more prominently in employment policies and staff development programmes.

Without any doubt, the media can also play a major role in offering language learning opportunities, particularly to get people started. The BBC's Learning Zone, freely available on the Internet, shows what is possible. The cultural institutes of the Member States have a role in this respect as well. However, creating a learning culture as envisaged by the Council and the Commission entails more than that. We need adult education institutions of the kind available in several Member States – such as the system of Escuelas Oficiales de Idiomas in this country, and we need co-operation between all stakeholders – schools, universities, adult education institutions, cultural institutes, enterprises, trade unions, voluntary organisations and so on and so forth. In many cases, this will require a change in attitude on the part of the providers. For example, secondary schools and university language resource centres have to realise that they have a mission beyond the education of their own students. Public and private providers of adult education can often offer a limited range of languages and lower level courses only; universities usually have a much wider choice both in terms of languages and levels, which they should open up for the general public or for specific target groups. Like in other sectors of education, there are promising examples in several Member States of what can be done in this respect, and these can serve as points of departure for new developments elsewhere.

The issue of validation and recognition apart, there remain two major problems, which, to a certain extent, are interrelated – those of properly qualified teaching staff and of funding. Even where, like in Germany, there is a system of adult education in place, the quality of language provision is often unsatisfactory because of the poor qualifications of course tutors, who are usually paid by the hour. There have been several attempts in the past to arrange in-service training for adult education language

teachers, but they usually came to nought because participation in the training courses was not linked to financial incentives. If adult language learning is to become a major component in our systems of education, this will have to be remedied.

This leads straight on to funding. Of course, individual citizens themselves are, to a certain extent, responsible for paving their own learning paths, i.e. for paying for their further language learning. However, if language learning is important not just for personal and cultural reasons but also for general social and economic reasons, both the public and private sector will have to contribute to it as well.

Validation, assessment, recognition, certification

Lifelong language learning as envisaged by the EU can only work if there is coherence and continuity between different institutions and different sectors of education, if skills and competences acquired inside and outside formal educational settings can be identified, assessed, and recognised by education institutions and interpreted by employers, and if qualifications and competences can be transferred across national borders. Ultimately, what seems to be required is a system which allows citizens to group together their qualifications and competences gained in different settings and countries and present them anywhere in Europe in a transparent manner. If I am not mistaken, the discussion about the kinds of instruments to be created for this purpose has only just got underway. There is talk of a portfolio system, of a European CV etc. The dimension of the task at hand can be grasped if one bears in mind that even at a national level one and the same grade in school leaving certificates issued by different schools can mean different things.

The issues of assessment and certification will be discussed in detail by Professor Alderson. I would just like to make the following general remarks. To my mind, the skill-specific scales of the Common European Framework have considerable potential for the assessment of language proficiency and for the transfer of qualifications. They are transversal; the descriptors relate to language use in that they describe what a learner can do at a given level; they are independent of specific education and training institutions and systems; they can be used as a basis for the development of language testing systems, such as DIALANG. The European Language Portfolio, which is based on the CEF scales, has considerable pedagogical potential both for the individual learner and for systems in which the ELP is used. I am particularly impressed by its European dimension, the fact that it allows learners to map out their own specific multilingual profiles. The question remains whether the ELP can function as an instrument for facilitating official validation and recognition of linguistic skills and competences or whether, ultimately, we shall need national certification systems based on the CEF scales – or even one such system for the entire Union. And if we go for a European certification system, what should it be like? Should we have a multilingual system of valid and reliable tests – a kind of DIALANG system which issues certificates?

I can only ask these questions; I cannot give an answer. However, if the basic skills aspect of foreign languages is to be taken seriously, if we want to have indicators for measuring progress in the field of language learning both at a national and at a European level, and if we want to make individual language learning paths and their outcomes transparent and comparable across Europe, a portfolio like the Council of Europe's European Language Portfolio may not be all that is required.

I should like to finish by thanking the organisers for inviting me to this Seminar and by congratulating the Spanish Ministry on their perfect sense of timing. Lifelong language learning has, over the past couple of years, developed into one of the key issues of EU policy. We all know why lifelong language learning is so important for the future of the Union. We now have to reflect on how to make it succeed. I wish and hope that our deliberations over the next two days will be a significant contribution to various initiatives currently underway at all levels, notably to the Objectives Process, in which lifelong language learning occupies such a prominent position.

Thank you.