

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'Commission staff working paper — Promoting language learning and linguistic diversity'

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On 25 November 2002 the European Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on 'Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity'.

At its 396th plenary session of 22 and 23 January 2003 (meeting of 23 January) the European Economic and Social Committee appointed Ms Heinisch rapporteur-general and adopted the following opinion by 105 votes to 4 with 4 abstentions.

1. Introduction

1.1. The need for European Union and Member State action to improve language learning was recognised by the Heads of the State and Government who in Barcelona in March 2002 called for further action to improve the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age. This conviction was also behind the Education Council's invitation to Member States on 14 February 2002 to take concrete steps to promote linguistic diversity and language learning, and its invitation to the Commission to draw up proposals in these fields by early 2003.

1.2. Article 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union of 7 December 2000 states that the Union shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity.

1.3. In 2001 Europe celebrated the European Year of Languages, which was a resounding success and stimulated many thousands of activities involving hundreds of thousands of citizens across Europe in the task of promoting language learning and linguistic diversity. It generated widespread enthusiasm for language learning and increased the motivation of many to get personally involved in learning about other languages and cultures.

2. General comments

2.1. The European Commission's 2003 work programme (late October 2002) is intended to consolidate the Lisbon process, by:

- developing proven procedures in the field of lifelong learning and e-learning (e.g. common work programme on general and vocational education systems, the information society for all);

- adopting a new action programme on e-learning;

- submitting an action plan to promote a multilingual Europe.

With its action plan to promote language learning, the European Commission is reacting to the experience of the European Year of Languages and that derived from the evaluation of its results.

The EESC considers it positive and forward-looking that the Commission does not regard the European years (of lifelong learning and languages) as isolated activities but has rather evaluated their results and incorporated them into the education programmes. The EESC supports this approach.

2.2. Moreover, it is inevitable that, in view of the forthcoming *accession* of 12 new Member States, the EU should focus its attention on languages.

The EESC therefore welcomes the promotion of language learning throughout the EU. Languages must not be allowed to become frontiers or barriers to global integration and communication. Articles 149 and 150 of the EC Treaty are the basis of education policy in the EU. The responsibility of the Member States for curricula and the shaping of education systems is not affected.

2.3. The EU must react to the coming challenge in a multilingual way. Only in this way can the cultural identity of peoples, regional diversity and thus the cultural richness of Europe be maintained. And at the same time this will do justice to the principle of subsidiarity.

'A man who speaks two languages is worth two men' (King Charles V 1338-1380).

2.4. It is the job of the EESC to promote and facilitate worker mobility, and to ensure that reciprocal understanding and solidarity are no longer hindered by language barriers, whilst however maintaining Europe's linguistic and cultural diversity. All Europe's languages have the same cultural value.

3. Conclusions

3.1. The EESC supports the Commission in promoting language learning and cultural diversity with due regard to subsidiarity in the education field. The EESC stresses the need to ensure that basic knowledge of the mother tongue is fully consolidated (results of the Pisa study) before embarking on foreign language learning.

3.2. The EESC calls for intensive cooperation between the Member States in order to develop learning networks and ensure a continuous exchange of proven methods, didactic approaches, learning materials and initial and further teacher training.

3.3. The EESC calls for linguistic diversity to be strengthened by means of targeted measures in all Community programmes (regional employment and social policy, research and development, information society etc.), e.g.:

- More subtitling of films through the Media programme;
- More translation of literary works into other languages through the Culture 2000 programme.

3.4. The EESC sees the Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci programmes, however, as the main vehicles for promoting language learning. Special projects should be established in this area

- for better quality language teaching;
- for the promotion of new learning materials;
- for comparing extra-curricular learning programmes;
- for easier access for all to language learning opportunities;
- for lifelong language learning;
- for promoting regional and minority languages.

Here the EESC sees an opportunity for support through an interaction between education and research.

3.5. The EESC calls for appropriate projects to promote pre-school language learning.

3.5.1. New approaches to language learning through music should be incorporated into the European projects. (e.g. Switzerland/France)

'Anyone who wishes to bring different people together must first find a common language'. This common language is undoubtedly music. 'Music has transfer effects on speech development both in the mother tongue and in the learning of foreign languages' (Donata Elschenbroich, *Weltwissen der Siebenjährigen*).

3.5.2. It is important that parents should be offered the same language-learning opportunities as their children. This is an important step in efforts to achieve integration. Language acquisition begins in the family.

The EESC sees the promotion of language learning during the earliest stages of childhood as a way of curbing violence and xenophobia among very young children (pre-school groups may include children from up to 20 different countries) — preventive approach.

3.5.3. The EESC calls for cross-border cooperation in the pre-school area between parents, educators/teachers. The process of sensitising children to language learning must begin very early and the foundations of lifelong learning must be laid at the pre-school stage.

3.6. The EESC calls for an assessment of training plans for foreign language learning from pre-school to tertiary level and proposes that all aspiring teachers be required to spend part of their study period abroad.

3.7. The EESC also proposes that all schoolchildren be encouraged to spend a period abroad in the course of their school careers.

3.8. The EESC calls for improved approaches to language teaching rather than for more class time for the teaching of a single language and would like to see greater involvement of native speakers.

3.9. With regard to adult lifelong learning, the EESC calls for special further education programmes for parents and senior citizens which take account of different learning situations. The competition entitled European label for innovative projects in language teaching and learning should be retained.

3.10. The EESC calls for freedom of choice in deciding on the two foreign languages to be taught in addition to the mother tongue.

3.10.1. The EESC supports the Franco-German Learn your neighbour's language programme.

3.10.2. The EESC is aware that most parents choose English as their children's first foreign language.

The EESC sees English as a *lingua franca*, while being aware of the limits of any *lingua franca* (it does not permit any real understanding of other cultures). Circumstances dictate that English will probably in time become the language spoken by a majority of Europeans.

3.10.3. The EESC sees a need to think about the choice of official and working languages and to encourage young people to take up the relevant professions (interpreter, translator etc).

3.11. The EESC is aware of shortcomings in the arrangements for implementing various programme areas, with regard to user-friendliness, transparency, timely availability of documents and forms, and calls for implementing arrangements to remain in force for a longer period.

3.12. The EESC calls for greater transparency in coordination between the Commission and national authorities

3.13. The EESC calls on the Commission to support the dissemination of suitable high-quality learning materials via European networks.

3.14. The EESC sees it as its task to inform the organisations and associations represented at the Committee on the need for promotion of languages, and to call on them to assume responsibility for supporting all their citizens in their language learning and to ensure that this opportunity is made available to them across the board through learning networks.

The coordination of learning opportunities must be monitored (communicative/integrated approach).

The EESC therefore feels that it should be involved by the Commission in the implementation of the programmes, and that it should be responsible for organising hearings and the dissemination of information and for raising the awareness of the partners at European level. The EESC can act as a forum for the exchange of opinions and their dissemination. This is more likely to yield results than large-scale consultation structures (the proposed timetable to 31 January 2003 is too short) and it is in line with the procedures of the Commission and the EESC.

The EESC is a bridge between Europe and civil society. Its members directly represent the interests of the EU's disparate civil society organisations. In this capacity the Committee defends the right to European citizenship, and language learning is an important part of this.

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*The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee*

Roger BRIESCH
