

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION
of 22 May 2019
on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages
(2019/C 189/03)

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and in particular Articles 165 and 166 thereof,

Having regard to the proposal from the European Commission,

Whereas:

- (1) In the Communication ‘Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture⁽¹⁾’ the European Commission sets out the vision of a European Education Area in which high-quality, inclusive education, training and research are not hampered by borders; spending time in another Member State to study, learn or work has become the standard; speaking two languages in addition to one’s mother tongue is far more widespread; and people have a strong sense of their identity as Europeans, as well as an awareness of Europe’s shared cultural and linguistic heritage and its diversity.
- (2) At the informal working session of the Gothenburg Summit for fair jobs and growth, Heads of State or Government discussed the role of education and culture for the future of Europe. The European Council Conclusions of 14 December 2017⁽²⁾ call on the Member States, the Council and the Commission, in line with their respective competences, to take work forward in this area.
- (3) In its conclusions, adopted in Barcelona on 15 and 16 March 2002, the European Council called for further action in the field of education ‘to improve the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age’.
- (4) Literacy competence and multilingual competence are defined among the eight key competences in the Council Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning⁽³⁾.
- (5) Multilingual competence⁽⁴⁾ is at the heart of the vision of a European Education Area. With increasing mobility for education, training and work inside the Union, increasing migration from third countries into the Union, and the overall global cooperation, education and training systems need to reconsider the challenges in teaching and learning of languages and the opportunities provided by Europe’s linguistic diversity.
- (6) Increasing and improving language learning and teaching could strengthen the European dimension in education and training. It could foster the development of a European identity in all its diversity, complementing local, regional and national identities and traditions and a better understanding of the Union and its Member States. Multilingual competence provides a better understanding of other cultures, thus contributing to the development of citizenship and democratic competences.
- (7) Almost half of Europeans⁽⁵⁾ report that they are unable to hold a conversation in any language other than their first language⁽⁶⁾. The lack of multilingual competence is a source of difficulty, hampering meaningful exchanges between public administrations and individuals especially in border regions⁽⁷⁾.

⁽¹⁾ COM(2017)673 final

⁽²⁾ EUCO 19/1/17 REV 1

⁽³⁾ OJ C 189, 4.6.2018, p. 1.

⁽⁴⁾ While the Council of Europe uses the term ‘plurilingualism’ for referring to multiple language competences of individuals, European Union’s official documents use ‘multilingualism’ to describe both individual competences and societal situations. This is partly due to difficulties making a distinction between plurilingual and multilingual in other languages than English and French.

⁽⁵⁾ Europeans and their languages — special Eurobarometer report summary 2012.

⁽⁶⁾ First language: language variety (-ies) acquired and used in early childhood (approximately before the age of two or three years) in which the human language faculty was first acquired. This term is preferred to mother tongue, which is often inappropriate as the first language is not necessarily that of the mother only.

⁽⁷⁾ Commission Communication on boosting growth and cohesion in EU border regions, COM(2017) 534.

- (8) Only four in ten learners in secondary education reach the 'independent user' level in the first foreign language, indicating an ability to have a simple conversation. Only one quarter attains this level in the second foreign language⁽⁸⁾. A comparative analysis of languages in education and training showed that most Member States face challenges in ensuring appropriate learning outcomes in the field of languages. While challenges exist in all education sectors, they are particularly acute in vocational education and training where less emphasis is put on language learning.
- (9) Limited multilingual competence remains one of the main obstacles to benefit from the opportunities offered by the European education, training and youth programmes. Conversely, enhanced multilingual competence will enable persons to benefit more from the opportunities the internal market offers, such as free movement of workers, as well as take a more informed decision about opportunities in other EU countries.
- (10) Multilingual competence provides competitive advantages for both businesses and job seekers — if it forms part of a broader set of necessary skills. There is positive correlation between foreign language skills and the likelihood of being in employment. However, the results from the latest Continuing Vocational Training Survey (CVTS 2016) show that only 7,9 % of companies (that provide training for their employees) send their employees for language courses (ranging from 22,1 % in Slovakia to 0,5 % in Ireland).
- (11) To sustain current standards of living, support high rates of employment and foster social cohesion in the light of tomorrow's society and world of work, people need the right set of skills and competences. The acquisition of better multilingual competence could support increasing mobility and cooperation within the Union. This is also key in view of ensuring full integration of immigrant children, students and adults.
- (12) New ways of learning need to be explored for a society that is becoming increasingly mobile and digital. In particular digital developments allow for more and more languages to be learned and practiced outside the classroom and curricula. Current assessment procedures do not fully reflect these developments.
- (13) The European Pillar of Social Rights states as its first principle that everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that allow full participation in society and successful transitions in the labour market. Multilingual competence is one of the key competences that could foster employability, personal fulfilment, active citizenship, intercultural understanding and social inclusion; it is defined as 'the ability to use different languages appropriately and effectively for communication'.
- (14) More than half of the Member States officially recognise regional or minority languages within their borders for legal or administrative purposes, including national sign languages. Several of these languages transcend national borders. The languages added by the immigrant or refugee populations complete the linguistic picture in Europe.
- (15) Schools are becoming increasingly aware of the necessity to make sure that all children, regardless of background and first language, acquire a very good level of the language of schooling, if appropriate through special support measures. This supports equity and equal opportunities, and reduces the risk of early school leaving.
- (16) Language-awareness in schools could include awareness and understanding of the literacy and multilingual competences of all pupils, including competences in languages that are not taught in the school. Schools may distinguish between different levels of multilingual competence needed depending on context and purpose and corresponding to every learner's circumstances, needs, abilities and interests.
- (17) The shortage of teachers in some subjects, including modern foreign languages, is mentioned as a challenge in more than half of the European Union's education systems and several Member States have introduced reforms or incentives to tackle shortages of language teachers. Those reforms and incentives could include scholarships to attract language graduates with other professional experience into teaching or reformed teacher education programmes.

⁽⁸⁾ European Commission (2012) — First European Survey on language competences, executive summary.

- (18) Initiatives to improve key competences in school education, including by better linking real life experience with academic learning, using digital technologies and supporting innovation in schools, have strengthened the focus on the learning outcomes. They also supported the acquisition of multilingual competence.
- (19) Content and Language Integrated Learning, i.e. teaching subjects through a foreign language, and digital and online tools for language learning have proven efficient for different categories of learners. Language teachers across Europe could benefit from continuous professional development in both updating their digital competence and learning how they can best support their teaching practice by using different methodologies and new technologies. An inventory of open educational resources could support them in this, taking into account the work of the Council of Europe.
- (20) Various initiatives in Europe have supported the definition and development of multilingual competence. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages supports learning and teaching of all languages as a transparent, coherent and comprehensive reference instrument to assess and compare competence levels. It distinguishes between basic user level, independent user level and proficient user level with the latter enabling a user to work or study in the language assessed. In 2018, the instrument was complemented with new descriptors for mediation, sign languages and other areas and with collations of descriptors for young learners, with a view to making the Framework more accessible to a wider public.
- (21) The Europass Language Passport is a standardised template for self-assessment of language skills, which uses the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. It helps citizens communicate their language skills during a mobility period, either for educational purposes, employment or training, while also helping employers understand the language skills of the workforce.
- (22) The European Language Label⁽⁹⁾ rewards excellence and innovation in language teaching in all participating countries. It provides an incentive for schools and other institutions to use new methodologies and strategies addressing local, regional, national or European priorities. It has contributed to raising the awareness about European cooperation in the field of language teaching and learning and enhancing the multilingual dynamics across educational sectors.
- (23) All Member States have acknowledged the need to enhance multilingualism and develop multilingual competence in the Union. The European Commission will work on a proposal for a new set of European education and training benchmarks together with options for data collection, which may include a European benchmark on language competences, with the aim to provide a more accurate picture of multilingual competence in the Union. These benchmarks will be discussed and decided by the Council in the context of setting up the new strategic framework in education and training after 2020.
- (24) While acknowledging that multilingual competence is acquired throughout life and opportunities should be made available at all stages in life, this Recommendation addresses in particular primary and secondary education and training, including where possible early childhood education and care and initial vocational education and training.
- (25) This Recommendation fully respects the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.

RECOMMENDS THAT MEMBER STATES:

In accordance with national and European legislation, available resources and national circumstances, and in close cooperation with all relevant stakeholders:

- (1) Explore ways to help all young people to acquire before the end of upper secondary education and training — in addition to the languages of schooling — where possible, a competence level in at least one other European language which allows them to use the language effectively for social, learning and professional purposes, and to encourage the acquisition of an additional (third) language to a level which allows them to interact with a degree of fluency⁽¹⁰⁾.
- (2) Apply comprehensive approaches to improve teaching and learning of languages at national, regional, local or school level as appropriate, and where relevant, making use of the policy examples set out in the Annex.

⁽⁹⁾ The European Language Label is awarded at national level and supported through the Erasmus+ programme.

⁽¹⁰⁾ The acquisition of classical languages, such as Ancient Greek and Latin, can be part of the learner's linguistic repertoire.

- (3) Ensure that all sectors of primary and secondary education are addressed, starting as early as possible, including initial vocational education and training.
- (4) As part of such comprehensive approaches, support the development of language awareness in schools and vocational education and training institutions by:
 - (a) actively supporting and recognising the mobility of learners and teachers, including by making use of opportunities provided by the relevant Union funding programmes;
 - (b) strengthening the competence in the languages of schooling as the basis for further learning and educational achievement in school for all learners, and especially those from migrant, refugee or disadvantaged backgrounds;
 - (c) helping the learners to broaden their competences in the languages of schooling by supporting teachers in addressing the use of specific language in their respective subject areas, including raising the awareness of different language registers and specific vocabulary;
 - (d) promoting continuity in language education between the different school levels;
 - (e) valuing linguistic diversity of learners and using it as a learning resource including involving parents, other carers and the wider local community in language education;
 - (f) considering opportunities to assess and validate language competences that are not part of the curriculum, but result from informal learning (for example in the case of learners of migrant, refugee or bilingual backgrounds) or from attending a formal school system of another country where the learner has lived previously, for instance through expanding the range of languages that can be added to learners' school leaving qualifications;
 - (g) strengthening the use of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, especially for inspiring developments in language curricula, testing and assessment;
 - (h) ensuring support for schools to define their own approach to language learning, while respecting national legislation and helping schools to actively value and use their linguistic diversity;
 - (i) offering opportunities for schools and training centres to strengthen their European perspective for example through continued implementation of the European Language Label, the development of school labels with a particular European perspective and by organising national events around language diversity.
- (5) Support teachers, trainers, inspectors and school leaders in the development of language awareness by:
 - (a) investing, where appropriate, in the initial and continuing education of language teachers to enhance their competences and to attract and retain staff in order to maintain a broad language offer in primary education and secondary education and training;
 - (b) enhancing voluntary cooperation between institutions in charge of initial and continuing education for language teachers;
 - (c) including preparation for linguistic diversity in the classroom in initial education and continuous professional development of teachers and school leaders;
 - (d) promoting study periods abroad for students studying towards a teaching qualification, while encouraging mobility for all teachers, trainers, inspectors and school leaders;
 - (e) promoting the integration and recognition of learning mobility into the education of language teachers, so that newly graduated language teachers benefit from preferably a semester of learning or teaching experience abroad, especially through the Erasmus+ programme;
 - (f) promoting the use of eTwinning⁽¹⁾ and other forms of virtual cooperation as well as face-to-face network building to enrich the learning experiences in schools and develop multilingual competence of teachers and pupils;
 - (g) promoting collaborative teaching between language teachers and teachers of other subjects.

⁽¹⁾ eTwinning is a community of teachers from pre-primary to upper secondary schools, hosted on a secure internet platform.

- (6) Encourage research in and use of innovative, inclusive and multilingual pedagogies, including for example the use of digital tools, intercomprehension and ways to teach subjects through a foreign language (Content and Language Integrated Learning) and innovate initial teacher education.
- (7) Ensure that language competences acquired at different stages of education and training are monitored, complementing existing information on the provision of language learning.
- (8) Report through existing frameworks and tools on experiences and progress in promoting language learning.

HEREBY WELCOMES THE COMMISSION'S INTENTION TO:

- (9) Support the follow-up of this Recommendation by facilitating mutual learning among Member States and developing multilingual tools and resources in cooperation with Member States, such as:
 - (a) guidelines on how to link language teaching and assessment to the Common European Framework of Reference for language competences ⁽¹²⁾;
 - (b) evidence-based guidance material on new forms of learning and supportive approaches also for languages that are not part of the curriculum;
 - (c) digital tools for language learning and professional development of educational staff, in the field of language learning, such as massive open online courses, self-assessment tools ⁽¹³⁾, networks, including eTwinning and the School Education Gateway's Teacher Academy;
 - (d) methodologies and tools supporting the monitoring of multilingual competence in the Union.
- (10) Strengthen the mobility of school pupils, learners in vocational education and training and teachers, trainers, inspectors and school leaders within the Erasmus+ programme and support overall the use of Union funding, such as Erasmus+, Horizon 2020, Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) or European Structural and Investment Funds, where appropriate, for the implementation of this Recommendation and its Annex, without any prejudice to negotiations on the next Multiannual Financial Framework.
- (11) Strengthen cooperation with the Council of Europe, and the European Centre for Modern Languages, in the field of language learning to enhance innovative methods in teaching and learning of languages and increase awareness of the crucial role of language learning in modern societies.
- (12) Report on the follow-up of the implementation of the Recommendation primarily through existing frameworks and tools.

Done at Brussels, 22 May 2019.

For the Council

The President

C.B. MATEI

⁽¹²⁾ Based on the experiences and expertise developed by the Council of Europe in creating and updating the Framework and by the European Centre for Modern Languages and the European Commission in applying this work to teacher education through jointly financed projects.

⁽¹³⁾ Currently Europass offers a self-assessment tool for language competence and the functioning and effectiveness of this will be reviewed as part of implementation of the Europass Decision.

ANNEX

Language awareness in schools — developing comprehensive approaches to language learning

Comprehensive language approaches could support the implementation of the language learning Recommendation. This annex lists a number of pedagogical principles and good practices, which have in common the aim to increase the general language awareness in schools, with the ultimate goal to improve language-learning outcomes.

The teaching of language is an important element across all subjects looking at the various ways language is used in the classroom and the vital role language plays in learning and understanding subject content. Acquiring a good command of academic language goes hand in hand with the development of subject knowledge and understanding.

Language awareness in schools and vocational education and training institutions could support the understanding that language learning is a dynamic process and a continuum — the acquisition of the first language and its different registers and styles continues and is deeply interlinked with the learning of other languages, in different levels of proficiency, corresponding to every learner's circumstances, needs and interests.

Language awareness in schools and vocational education and training institutions could support reflections on the language dimension in all levels of school organisation, teaching and practice: in literacy development, foreign language learning, in subject teaching, for acknowledging other languages brought in by pupils, in communication with parents and with the wider school environment, etc.

Close cooperation among the different members of the school community, ideally within a concept of the school as a learning organisation or within a whole school approach, can promote such an understanding of language awareness.

In order to support language awareness in schools and vocational education and training institutions, the following examples of good practice have been identified.

1. Multilingualism in schools and vocational education and training institutions

- A positive attitude towards linguistic diversity can help to create a language friendly environment where learning and using multiple languages is perceived as a richness and a resource. Awareness of the importance of language learning, and of the educational, cognitive, social, intercultural, professional and economic benefits of the wider use of languages can be increased and encouraged.
- The development of language competence and of linguistic awareness can be integrated transversally into the curricula. Integrating languages and other subjects can make it possible to provide more authentic learning geared towards real-life situations.
- The motivation of learners to study languages can be enhanced by linking education content to their own lives and interests, taking informal learning into consideration and encouraging synergies with extra-curricular activities. Links between everyday life practice of language and schools or vocational education and training institutions can be strengthened through recognition of prior learning of languages, and offering the possibility to add multilingual competence resulting from informal learning (for example in the case of learners of migrant, refugee or bilingual backgrounds) or from attending a formal school system of another country where the learner has lived previously, to school leaving certificates.
- Learners' entire linguistic repertoire can be valued and supported in school and also used as pedagogical resource for further learning of all learners. Pupils can help each other in learning, explain their language(s) to others and compare languages.
- Schools could offer a wider range of languages in addition to the main global languages of communication. The uptake can be different depending on whether a country has two or more state languages or if there is a declared interest to promote the learning of the language of a neighbouring country.

- Establishing partnerships between early childhood education and care institutions and schools in border regions that will encourage children to learn the language of their neighbour from an early age and decrease language barriers in cross-border regions.
- Further encouraging schools and vocational education and training institutions to use the European Day of Languages and the European Language Label to promote language learning and linguistic diversity. Promoting school labels with a particular European dimension to foster a European perspective for schools and training centres.

2. Efficient and innovative teaching for enhanced language learning

- The potential of digital tools could be fully embraced to enhance language learning, teaching and assessment. Technology can massively support broadening the language offer, provide opportunities for language exposure, and be very useful for supporting those languages which are not taught in schools. Developing critical thinking and media literacy and an appropriate and safe use of technology can be an essential learning element in this context.
- Virtual cooperation between schools through eTwinning and other forms of virtual cooperation can allow young people to improve language learning, work with peers from another country and prepare for mobility to study, train or volunteer abroad.
- Pupils' mobility, including through Erasmus+, could become a regular part of the learning process. This should extend to virtual and wider staff mobility.
- A mix of diagnostic, formative and summative assessment can be used by teachers, trainers and learners to monitor and evaluate language development; individual language portfolios are used to keep track of the progress, for example through the European Language Portfolio or the Europass Language Passport.

3. Support for teachers and trainers

- Teachers of modern languages could be encouraged to take part in exchange schemes with countries where their target language is spoken, as part of their initial education and/or further professional development. Every newly graduated language teacher could have spent preferably a semester of learning or teaching abroad.
- Teachers and trainers of other subjects than modern languages could gain language awareness and knowledge about language didactics, and acquire strategies for supporting learners.
- Language assistants could be included in language teaching, using the opportunities provided by exchange schemes between Member States.
- Continuing professional development opportunities can be made accessible to teachers (through networks, communities of practice, massive online language courses, centres of expertise, cooperative online learning, collaborative action research, etc.) in order to keep them up to date with latest pedagogical innovations and to upskill them.

4. Partnerships and links in the wider school environment to support language learning

- Schools and vocational education and training institutions could cooperate with parents on how they can support their children's language learning, especially when children grow up with more than one language or use a different language at home than the language of schooling.
- Schools and vocational education and training institutions can develop partnerships with language centres/languages laboratories, public libraries, cultural centres or other cultural associations, universities and research centres in order to create more engaging learning environments, to enrich the uptake of languages and to improve and innovate teaching practice.
- Schools, vocational education and training institutions and municipalities can pool resources to create language centres with a larger offer of languages, in order to maintain less-spoken languages, and/or languages that are not taught in school.
- Cooperation with employers in the region or beyond can help increasing the understanding of the importance of multilingual competence in working life and can help to ensure that multilingual competence gained effectively supports employability.

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- Cross-border partnerships between education and training institutions in border regions could be encouraged. Mobility of students, teachers, trainers and administrative staff, as well as doctoral candidates and researchers could be facilitated by offering information and courses in the languages spoken in the neighbouring country. Promotion of multilingualism within these cross-border partnerships can prepare graduates to enter the labour market in both sides of the border.
 - Promote cooperation between teacher education institutions.
-