

# SHAPING FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN EUROPE TOGETHER: THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

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## **Abstract**

*At present, in many EU countries, students have the possibility to study two foreign languages along their school years and, in addition to that, adults are encouraged to start or continue foreign language learning, as the ability to communicate in a foreign language gives them the chance to come into contact with the cultural values of other peoples, develop their personalities and create wider opportunities for social integration, beneficial to the individual and profitable for the community. This paper attempts to depict the origins and the evolution of the current reality and explain the role played by the European Union and the Council of Europe in setting the trend in this particular field. Using the documentary method of research, this paper aims at providing a diachronic perspective on the events and documents that initiated and laid the foundations for foreign language education not only in the European Union, but also in Europe, at large. Moreover, by critically analysing the recent past related to foreign language education in this region, our paper might offer a useful key to better understanding the present and possibly might help raise greater awareness of the importance of foreign language skills in today's globalized society.*

**Keywords:** *European Union, Council of Europe, language policy, foreign language teaching and learning, lifelong learning.*

## Introduction

Linguistic diversity is a key feature of Europe's identity and both the Brussels-based EU institutions and the Council of Europe in Strasbourg have actively promoted language

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learning and multilingualism/plurilingualism. The main language policy agencies within these two institutions are the Multilingualism Policy Unit of the EU's Directorate-General for Education and Culture and the Language Policy Unit of the Education Directorate of the Council of Europe. The work of these agencies is behind the important resolutions, charters and conventions produced by these bodies.

Both the EU and the CoE have developed and promoted policies that (1) place special emphasis on linguistic rights and diversity, mutual understanding, (2) strengthen democratic citizenship and (3) support social cohesion. In recent decades, an impressive number of projects, conferences and meetings have been organised under the auspices of EU or CoE in order to harmonise language learning, considering the general European context, and in order to set out development directions in terms of educational language policies, which should give European citizens the opportunity to learn more foreign languages throughout their lives, so as to become plurilingual and intercultural citizens, able to communicate with each other.

This paper aims at providing the reader with critical insights into the evolution of language education policies in Europe. Thus, by means of documentary analysis, one attempts to give a diachronic overview of the technical instruments (initiatives, recommendations, resolutions, etc.) drafted and put forward by the aforementioned actors, pointing to the possible strengths and weaknesses that characterize the documents meant to function as general guidelines for foreign language teaching and learning in Europe. Hopefully, our concise analysis will allow us to suggest further research directions.

#### The role of the European Union

The EU's interest in human resources issues has progressively increased, at present encompassing policies and programmes covering almost entirely the field of education and training. As a matter of fact, vocational training was the first educational issue to be included on the EU agenda and originally appeared in the Treaty of Rome (1957), being closely linked to the creation of a common market in goods and services, capital and jobs, and education has been a going concern of the EU ever since 1992, when the Maastricht Treaty devoted an article to this particular topic.

Both the European Commission and the Council of Ministers were involved in educational issues during the period between the two treaties, organising a wide range of action projects in this area. The formal inclusion of education and training in the Maastricht Treaty<sup>8</sup> proves the importance attached by the EU to these aspects. In article 126 of the treaty, the EU (named the European Community at that time) was asked 'to contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging co-operation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity'. Furthermore, the EU's competence extended essentially to provide incentives for Member States to cooperate with a view to: developing the European dimension, particularly through the teaching of foreign languages; encouraging the mobility of teachers and pupils/students, promoting measures for the recognition of diplomas and periods of study; organising exchanges of information and experience on topics common to the educational systems in the Member States; developing distance learning<sup>9</sup>.

The EU's language policy began to take shape more clearly in 1995, when 'The White Paper on Education and Training – Teaching and Learning towards a Learning Society', a reference document on EU lifelong learning, came out, establishing five lines of action: (1) encouraging the acquisition of new knowledge; (2) bringing school and the business sector closer together; (3) combating exclusion; (4) developing proficiency in three Community languages; (5) treating capital investment and investment in training on an equal basis – training should be regarded as an investment, not as an additional expense<sup>10</sup>. Lifelong learning is the concept that underlie all these objectives, and the European Commission points to its significance in economic terms, considering its impact on employment and competitiveness. Also, according to the "White Paper on Education and Training – Teaching and Learning towards a Learning Society", education systems are characterised by inflexibility and compartmentalisation, and by creating opportunities for lifelong learning,

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<sup>8</sup> Maastricht Treaty, 1992, art. 126, p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> Green Paper on Education, European Commission 1993, pp. 5-7.

<sup>10</sup> White Paper on Education and Training, 1995, p. 1.

there is the possibility of a professional reorientation for those who might need it. Education and training provide those landmarks necessary for the affirmation of collective identity and pave the way for new discoveries in science and technology. In this way, a degree of independence can be achieved and, at the same time, the level of cohesion and belonging increases, with Europeans being able to adapt more easily to the growing challenges, as a result of the impact of the information society, internationalization and scientific and technological knowledge<sup>11</sup>.

The fourth objective included in the White Paper (1995), learning three Community languages, must be seconded by the ability to adapt to working and living environments specific to the different cultures envisaged, since, by learning a foreign language, one gives access to the knowledge of a people. More specifically, in the given context, in this way, it is possible to build European identity by becoming aware of the European wealth and diversity, and to achieve a better understanding between European citizens. Also, the White Paper<sup>12</sup> reveals the close link that exists between school outcomes and learning a foreign language from an early age, the studies undertaken demonstrating the positive influence of foreign language learning on the mother tongue, by stimulating intellectual capacity and expanding the cultural horizon. Therefore, in order to achieve the proposed objective, the White Paper proposes the following support measures to be taken at European level:

- supporting the European Community in introducing assessment systems (including the development of quality indicators) and quality assurance schemes, including methods and materials used to teach Community languages;
- defining a 'European quality label' and awarding it to schools that meet certain criteria<sup>13</sup> on promoting proficiency in Community languages;
- supporting the exchange of teaching materials for language learning, suitable for various groups (adults, those with a low qualification, pre-schoolers and schoolchildren, etc.);
- encouraging learning Community languages from an early age, in particular through the exchange of teaching materials and experience in the field.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> White Paper on Education and Training, 1995, pp. 6-8, 53-54.

<sup>12</sup> White Paper on Education and Training, 1995, p. 47.

<sup>13</sup> The White Paper (1995, p. 49) lays down the following criteria: the use by all primary school pupils of a community language, and by secondary school pupils of two community languages; involvement of teachers from other EU member states; the use of methods to promote self-learning of foreign languages; setting up an organisation to enable contact between young people in the EU from different member countries (including through the use of information technology).

<sup>14</sup> White Paper on Education and Training, 1995, pp. 48-49.

In 1996, the "Green Paper – Education, Training, Research. The obstacles to transnational mobility" attempted to propose the right solutions to remove the various obstacles (lack of access for the unemployed to transnational training; status problems for those who wish to participate in internships or to perform voluntary work; territorial restrictions on student scholarships; divergences in tax arrangements for research scholarships; problems with the mutual recognition of university and professional diplomas, etc.) which hindered transnational mobility. The massive focus on becoming proficient in English, French and/ or German, and the lack of knowledge of other European languages represented the main obstacles which restricted mobility. Consequently, in Line of Action 8, dedicated to the reduction of linguistic and cultural barriers, the document stated that 'learning at least two Community languages has become a precondition if EU citizens are to benefit from the personal and professional opportunities open to them in the Single Market'<sup>15</sup>.

At the Lisbon European Council in March 2000, the EU set a new strategic objective for the next decade: to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy capable of sustained growth, able to offer more and better jobs and a high degree of social cohesion. In this sense, for people to acquire the education and training necessary to live and work in the knowledge society, the European Council set the target of developing a framework defining the basic skills that could be provided through lifelong learning: IT skills, **foreign languages**, technological culture, entrepreneurship and social skills<sup>16</sup>. The conclusions of the EU Council in Lisbon resulted in a document entitled 'A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning', published in October 2000 by the European Commission. The importance of language learning and the formation of new skills in the field of information technology as strategies for lifelong learning were underlined from the first message of the memorandum, suggesting that the acquisition of such skills could ensure universal and continuous access to education for European citizens. Moreover, the memorandum argued that lifelong learning would lead to the formation of active citizens able to face the complex challenges of the contemporary world, paying attention to the lifewide dimension of learning as well,

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<sup>15</sup> Green Paper: Education – Training – Research. The obstacles to transnational mobility, 1996, p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> Lisbon European Council (2000): Presidency Conclusions, para. (26).

which includes formal, informal and non-formal education, in a complementary relationship<sup>17</sup>. As an annex, the memorandum provided a number of examples of good practice, namely projects and initiatives with a clear European dimension, which illustrated innovative and flexible approaches so that citizens can adopt lifelong learning so as to develop their own potential to the fullest and to feel that they can contribute to building the new Europe.

As a direct consequence of all these initiatives, in order to strengthen political cooperation in the field of education and training, the work programme 'Education and Training 2010' (ET 2010) was launched in 2001, the objectives of which include the acquisition of key competences. Recommendation 2006/962/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning supported the work programme, defining eight key competences and describing the essential knowledge, skills and attitudes related to each of them. These key competences provided a reference framework in support of the efforts made at national and EU level to achieve the objectives they defined. This framework was primarily aimed at policymakers, education and training providers, employers and learners. Thus, in addition to communication in the mother tongue, mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology, digital competence, learning to learn, social and civic competences, a sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and expression, communication in foreign languages was also included. This key competence, in addition to the main dimensions of communication skills in the mother tongue, also involves the skills of mediation and intercultural understanding.

On the basis of the contributions of the Member States, in 2001, the European Commission formulated several objectives which it included in a report<sup>18</sup>, setting out the way forward for education systems to contribute to achieving the strategic goal set in Lisbon. As far as foreign languages were concerned, the Commission's report highlighted the fact that only by improving the teaching of foreign languages could Europe reach its potential, be it

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<sup>17</sup> A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, 2000, p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Commission report on the future objectives of education systems, Brussels, COM (2001) 59 final.

economic, cultural or social. Furthermore, the teaching of foreign languages must reflect multilingualism as a defining feature of European society.

In January 1999, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted 2001 as the European Year of Languages, which was subsequently enthusiastically supported by the European Commission, and was endorsed by a decision of the EU Council of Ministers and the European Parliament in the summer of 2000. Moreover, UNESCO and other international organisations expressed an interest in supporting this European proposal<sup>19</sup>. With the main objective of developing and promoting, at European level, a message on multilingualism, the 2001 – European Year of Languages initiative was a real challenge for Europe, taking into account the sometimes very different needs and aspirations of the countries and peoples involved.

Formally declaring 2001 as the European Year of Languages, by both the EU and the CoE, could be interpreted as a celebration of Europe's linguistic diversity. It is an important moment that united the efforts of the CoE's Strasbourg Language Policy Division with those of the European Commission to promote the learning of languages of any kind: national, regional, foreign, neighbouring, rare, etc. The central message was 'language learning opens doors and everyone can do it at any time', promoting language learning as a strategy for seizing the opportunities offered by European citizenship and, in particular, the right to free mobility within the EU. So, the target of this action was mainly the general public. Also, it was taken into account the dissemination of information on teaching and learning of foreign languages among specialists (teachers, trainers, translators, decision makers in the field of linguistic policy, etc.).

As a continuation of the directions initiated in 1995 with the White Paper, the Barcelona European Council of 2002 highlighted the place and role of education among the pillars underlying the European social model and stressed that Europe's education systems should become quality benchmarks of by 2010. As for foreign languages, the Barcelona document called for the development of a language proficiency indicator, leading to an

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<sup>19</sup> L. King, *The European Year of Languages – taking forward the languages debate*, *Language Teaching*, vol. 34/2001, issue 01, pp. 21-22.

improvement in the level of mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age<sup>20</sup>.

In 2003, the European Commission adopted 'Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004 – 2006', after a long process of preparation and consultation, pledging to carry out 45 new actions aimed at encouraging national, regional and local authorities to work towards "a major change of pace in terms of promoting language learning and diversity linguistics"<sup>21</sup> These actions fell into three main categories:

1. lifelong language learning, so that all citizens can benefit from being proficient in foreign languages - the actions in this category aimed at teaching foreign languages at all levels (pre-school and primary education, secondary and higher education, adult education)

2. improving the quality of language teaching at all levels - the actions in this category aimed at creating schools conducive to language learning, teacher training, teaching other subjects in foreign languages, testing language skills

3. building a language-friendly environment by accepting linguistic diversity, building communities conducive to language learning and facilitating their learning (*e.g.*, making learning facilities available to people who needed them)<sup>22</sup>.

The European Commission's first communication on Multilingualism, entitled 'A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism', was adopted in November 2005, complementing the action plan described above. The European Commission's Communication (2005) established three basic components of the EU's multilingualism policy: (1) ensuring that citizens have access to EU legislation, procedures and information in their own language; (2) emphasising the major role of languages and multilingualism in the European economy and identifying ways of further developing it; (3) encouraging all citizens to learn more than one language in order to optimise mutual understanding and communication<sup>23</sup>. With this initiative, the Commission also invited Member States to draw up national plans to promote multilingualism and, at the same time, to work with them to implement the European

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<sup>20</sup> Barcelona European Council (2002): Presidency Conclusions, para. (44).

<sup>21</sup> Promoting language learning and linguistic diversity: an action plan, COM (2003) 449 final, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Promoting language learning and linguistic diversity: an action plan, COM (2003) 449 final.

<sup>23</sup> A new framework strategy for multilingualism, COM (2005) 596 final.



Indicator of Language Competence, which was intended to lead to the collection of the most credible possible data on young people's language skills.

The importance of multilingualism to the EU was reinforced by the appointment in early 2007 of a first-ever Commissioner, Leonard Orban, as portfolio holder, although in the 2009 reshuffle of the Barroso cabinet, multilingualism was placed under the responsibility of the Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth. Under Commissioner Orban's mandate, the EC produced in 2008 the Communication "Multilingualism: an asset for Europe and a shared commitment", which highlighted the role of language policy as a cross-cutting element contributing to all other EU policies. The Communication explained what needed to be done to turn linguistic diversity into an asset for solidarity and prosperity. According to this document, the two central objectives of multilingualism policy were:

- raising awareness of the value and opportunities of the EU's linguistic diversity and encouraging the removal of barriers to intercultural dialogue;
- creating real opportunities for all citizens to learn to communicate in two languages in addition to their mother tongue<sup>24</sup>.

Member States were invited to offer, within their national educational systems, a wider range of languages and effective ways of learning them from early childhood throughout adult education, further valuing and developing language skills acquired outside formal education. Furthermore, the European Commission stated its determination to make strategic use of relevant EU programmes and initiatives to bring multilingualism 'closer to the citizen'<sup>25</sup>.

The European Commission's Communication (2008) was welcomed and supported by the EU Council (2008) and the European Parliament (2009) resolutions, with a focus on lifelong learning, competitiveness, mobility and employability. For example, in 2009, as a follow-up to its predecessor, in the Education and Training 2010 (ET 2010) work programme, the EU Council proposed a new strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, 'Education and Training 2020' (ET 2020), to respond to the challenges which were still relevant to creating a knowledge-based Europe and making

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<sup>24</sup> Multilingualism: an asset for Europe and a shared commitment, COM (2008) 566 final.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8.

lifelong learning a reality for all. Thus, through this framework, Member States received the support they needed to further develop their education and training systems, as these systems should provide all citizens with the means to reach their potential, as well as ensure sustainable economic prosperity and employability. The framework considered the whole spectrum of education and training systems from a lifelong learning perspective, covering all levels and contexts (including non-formal and informal learning).

In 2011, the European Commission returned with a report<sup>26</sup> on progress since 2008, providing a comprehensive inventory of EU action in this area. The report anticipated the 'Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training' (ET 2020), in which language learning was identified as a priority, with communication in foreign languages as one of the eight key competences for increasing the quality and effectiveness of education and training. The report underlined that language skills, by increasing employability, were crucial to the Agenda for new skills and jobs initiative launched in 2010 as part of the ET 2020 strategy. They were also a prerequisite for mobility, thus for the successful implementation of the Youth in Action initiative. In a broader perspective, language skills had the potential to encourage and facilitate the exercise of the right of EU citizens to move and settle freely within the territory of the Member States and to stimulate the trans-national exercise by citizens of a wide range of rights conferred on them by EU laws.

#### The role of the Council of Europe

To some extent, a European language policy has existed since the founding of the Council of Europe in 1949. This intergovernmental organisation, initially made up of 10 members and now comprising 46 European countries, often confused with the European Union or the Council of the European Union, was set out to defend human rights, parliamentary democracy and the principle of the rule of law, by promoting awareness of European cultural identity and diversity, by finding common solutions to the challenges

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<sup>26</sup> Report on the implementation of Council Resolution of 21 November 2008 on a European strategy for multilingualism (2008/C 320/01).

facing European society and by strengthening democratic stability in Europe by advocating political, legislative and constitutional reform.

When the European Cultural Convention (1954) was signed by the Member States, possible directions for action in culture, education and sport were provided. The Convention stated that "the aim of the Council of Europe is to achieve greater unity among its members for the protection and attainment of the ideals and principles which are their common heritage" (Council of Europe, 1954), thus encouraging the study of foreign languages, history and civilisation specific to each member country. According to Trim<sup>27</sup>, at that time, learning a foreign language was more a way of gaining access to the culture of another people, with culture meaning the higher culture, the intellectual aspects of a civilisation, the socio-anthropological meaning not being yet noticed. Although a Committee of Cultural Experts (renamed the Council for Cultural Co-operation in 1962) was set up following the signing of this convention to control the funds allocated, until 1959 no common educational strategy was envisaged, the Council of Europe being more concerned with economic and social reconstruction.

In November 1959, a conference of education ministers was held in Paris, which proposed a programme of cooperation in secondary and technical secondary education, including the coordination of curricula and the expansion of foreign language study. Council of Europe representatives participated in this conference and, at the end of its works, it was suggested that the Committee of Cultural Experts should promote seminars on common educational issues. The April 1960 seminar, organised by the French government, aimed to disseminate new methods for teaching foreign languages, specifically French for adults (*Le Français Fondamental*)<sup>28</sup>. A number of recommendations were made in response to this seminar: encouraging the audio-visual method; carrying out linguistic research aimed at selecting a basic vocabulary as well as the main grammatical constructions specific to a foreign language; informing textbook authors; adapting the teaching method to the needs of secondary education; developing carefully designed courses and exchanging teachers and

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<sup>27</sup> J.L.M. Trim, *Modern Languages in the Council of Europe 1954-1997*, Council of Europe, 2007, p. 5, available at <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680886eae>, last time consulted on 6.02.2023.

<sup>28</sup> K. Morrow, *Background to CEF*, in K. Morrow (ed.) *Insights from the Common European Framework*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004, p. 5.

researchers. Subsequent annual meetings of education ministers and conferences organised by the Council for Cultural Cooperation (CCC) elaborated on these recommendations, encouraging the inclusion of primary school pupils in the school population studying a foreign language and advocating the importance of a one-year training period in the target country for future language teachers as part of their initial training. Thus, a series of studies were carried out at the suggestion of CoE and published in 1963, one of which stressed the importance of setting up an institution which could make the results of language teaching research more readily available. Nevertheless, the establishment of a European Centre for Applied Linguistics was not put into practice, as CoE experts focused on creating national centres in universities, establishing international associations for language teachers (FIPLV - International Federation of Language Teachers Associations) or for researchers concerned with language learning and teaching (AILA - International Association of Applied Linguistics) and promoting the '*Major Project, Modern Languages*' programme.

The main aim of the '*Major Project, Modern Languages*' programme was to remove the traditional barriers that fragmented the language teaching profession in Europe, and to promote its coherence and effectiveness as a major force for European integration, while preserving cultural and linguistic diversity. More specifically, achieving this objective involved: organising meetings of those involved in similar tasks in the countries concerned; removing communication barriers between teachers and administrators and creating a close link between theory and practice by getting governments and various institutions, especially universities (concerned exclusively with literary and philological research), to accept and promote research into language learning, teaching and assessment. Between 1963 and 1972 these issues were largely achieved through consultative meetings of experts, in studies carried out at the request of CoE, and, above all, at government conferences held in each of the ten Member States. These conferences led to a growing consensus among decision-makers on language policy and their recognition of the role played by the Council of Europe in the design of language strategy. Thus, according to Trim<sup>29</sup> (2007: 13), Resolution (69)2 '*On an intensified Modern-Language Teaching Programme for Europe*' (1969) remains an

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<sup>29</sup> J.L.M. Trim, *Modern Languages in the Council of Europe 1954-1997*, Council of Europe, 2007, p. 7, available at <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680886eae>, last time consulted on 6.02.2023.

important landmark in the history of language teaching in the twentieth century, as it clearly stated that the purpose of language learning is to enable Europeans to communicate and cooperate freely with each other, while preserving the full diversity and vitality of European languages and cultures; rejected elitism and set as the main goal of national language policies access for all to language learning, within every education system, from primary to higher education and continuing with lifelong learning; recognised the potential of information technology; highlighted the importance of teacher training and reviewed the need to reform examinations and introduce new testing methods; launched a research programme and proposed more effective ways of disseminating research results. Trim also drew attention on the erroneous belief that CoE's concern with foreign languages began in 1971, due to a lack of information or difficulty in accessing information from the earlier period<sup>30</sup>. Moreover, Trim knowledgeably<sup>31</sup> pointed to the fact that the programmes and projects that were subsequently advanced would not have been possible without the debates, research, recommendations and decisions of the period just described.

The three CCC committees (*Committee on Higher Education and Research, Committee on General and Technical Education and Committee on Out-of-School Education*) were involved in the implementation of the 'Major Project, Modern Languages' programme. The main concern of the *Out-of-School Education Committee* was the development of the concept of lifelong learning and was primarily focused on adult education. This type of education posed problems in terms of organisation and administration, and M.B. Schwartz, a specialist in continuing education at the University of Nancy, suggested to the Committee that certain subjects (which allowed for this) should not be taught or assessed in their entirety, but rather be split up, with examinations taking place at the end of each stage completed, proposing a system similar to the credit-based system used successfully in the USA at the time. The Committee felt that the feasibility of this proposal could be investigated particularly in the field of language learning and teaching, and, after a series of preliminary meetings of experts, a symposium on "*Language Content, Means of Assessment and their Interaction on Language Teaching and Learning in Adult Education*" was held in Rüschtikon, Switzerland, from 3 - 7

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<sup>30</sup> *Idem*, p. 14

<sup>31</sup> Trim was directly involved in the development of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

May 1971, to examine three aspects considered important for the introduction of a credit system: (1) new forms of organising language content; (2) types of assessment within a credit system; (3) ways of implementing a credit system in language teaching/learning in adult education<sup>32</sup>. Extensive discussions took place at this symposium and, as a direct consequence of these discussions, it was decided to set up a working group to investigate the possibility of introducing a European credit system. Within this group of experts, it soon became clear that the role of an international organisation was not to impose arbitrary decisions, but to analyse the needs, interests and characteristics of foreign language learners in order to be able to propose general aims and principles, to provide models which practitioners could adapt to their own circumstances and to encourage the exchange of ideas and experiences between them. So, the group's main priority was to carefully investigate and formulate the fundamental principles on which a long-term European language policy could be based.

Given the 1970s circumstances (internationalisation of various economic and social issues as a direct consequence of the developments in communications and information technology), the demand for practical language skills grew and it was increasingly clear that changes were needed to meet the challenges. The marginal position of adult education was an advantage for the group of experts set up after the Rüschtikon symposium, as it gave the group the opportunity to develop a new approach to language learning and teaching without having to submit to political constraints that would have been difficult to avoid under different circumstances in an intergovernmental organisation, while at the same time having the possibility of exerting considerable influence if it had gained the support of CoE language policy makers. Thus, the group set out to develop strategies involving educational innovation, leading to curriculum and assessment reform; to encourage the development of qualitatively superior courses and teaching materials; and to match the specific types and content of initial and in-service language teacher training. To achieve these objectives, a series of studies were carried out and published (in 1973): (1) Richterich developed a model for describing the needs of adults and produced an analytical classification of categories of

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<sup>32</sup> J.L.M. Trim, *Modern Languages in the Council of Europe 1954-1997*, Council of Europe, 2007, p. 15, available at <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680886eae>, last time consulted on 6.02.2023.

adult foreign language learners; (2) Wilkins described the basic linguistic and situational content of a credit-unit system; (3) van Ek presented preliminary considerations of the concept of "threshold level" in a credit-unit system; (4) Trim continued the outline of the fundamental principles on which language learning and teaching should be based<sup>33</sup>.

Discussions continued in the expert group, and in 1975 van Ek published the "Threshold Level", a document detailing the minimum language requirements that people wishing to train themselves should achieve in order to be able to communicate in English on everyday matters with people from other countries and to be able to cope and lead a normal life when visiting another country. Until then, a foreign language learner's progress was assessed by their ability to construct correct sentences using the vocabulary items and grammatical structures they had learnt. From Threshold Level onwards, priority is given to situations that foreign language learners might encounter, with an emphasis on how they are expected to use the language in those situations. According to this model, the functions of language were divided into six broad categories: (1) conveying and obtaining information (2) expressing and inferring attitudes; (3) solving problems; (4) socialising; (5) structuring discourse; (6) repairing communication. Subsequently (1976), also under the auspices of the CoE, a version for French appeared (*Un niveau seuil*), then for Spanish, German, Italian, Danish, Dutch, Norwegian, etc., and in 2001 even for Romanian, the concept inaugurated in 1975 by van Ek for English proving its full value throughout its existence. Moreover, the model did not stagnate and, following research undertaken in the 1980s<sup>34</sup>, a revised and extended version was published in 1991 under the name *Threshold Level 1990*. According to Trim<sup>35</sup>, this version of the Threshold Level was to prove extremely valuable for Central and Eastern European countries, which had just joined the Council of Europe and by implication signed the Cultural Convention<sup>36</sup>.

When it was introduced, the Threshold Level was considered a low level of proficiency and generated interest to few assessment boards, and for a short time it was even accused of minimalism and lowering the standards of language teaching. However, subsequent

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<sup>33</sup> R. V. White, *The ELT Curriculum – Design. Innovation. Management*. Blackwell Publishing House, Oxford, 1988.

<sup>34</sup> Trim *et al.*, 1984; van Ek 1986, 1987.

<sup>35</sup> J.L.M. Trim, *Modern Languages in the Council of Europe 1954-1997*, Council of Europe, 2007, p. 20, available at <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680886eae>, last time consulted on 6.02.2023.

<sup>36</sup> *Idem*, p. 27.

research showed that there was a need to set a target that could be reached after only one year of study. Thus, in 1977, the Waystage level was designed by van Ek and Alexander<sup>37</sup>, and used as the basis for the development of the *Follow Me* course, developed under the auspices of the CoE and co-produced by the BBC, which was a resounding success, having been watched in 60 countries by over 500 million viewers since 1979. Initially, Waystage was seen as an interim objective, but gradually became a stand-alone level, revised and republished in 1991 as Waystage 1990.

The influence of the Expert Group did not remain confined to adult education, as in 1976 the Committee on General and Technical Education asked the group to adapt *Threshold Level* and *Un Niveau-Seuil* to the needs of schools/school education. Furthermore, the CoE Parliamentary Assembly adopted Recommendation 814 (1977), addressed to the Committee of Ministers, which included the following demands:

(a) asking the governments of CoE member countries to develop language teaching taking into account: the particular needs of less privileged groups, especially immigrants; the need to diversify the languages taught; the cultural advantages of maintaining linguistic minorities in Europe; the pedagogical aspects of language learning;

b) encouraging the adoption of coordinated educational policies for language teaching based on proposals drawn up at European level;

c) reporting on action taken by member countries following Resolution (69) 2 adopted by the Committee of Ministers;

d) supporting the activities of the CCC in the field of languages, and in particular the research undertaken by the group of experts involved in the development of a European system of unit-credits, with particular emphasis on the different basic requirements for different types of learners (threshold levels).

A meeting in 1977 called for abandoning the overly broad objectives of the *Major Project, Modern Languages* and concentrating available resources on the direction set by the expert group. In fact, the expert group was replaced by a project group of 19 members, representing 13 countries, under the direction of John Trim. The project, which ran from 1977 to 1981, was called: "*Modern Languages: improving and intensifying language learning as factors making for European understanding, co-operation and mobility*". The proposed objectives were in line with the general principles of lifelong learning which underpinned the work of the CCC. Among others, the aims of the project were: to develop curricula that

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<sup>37</sup> *Idem*, p. 21.



meet the needs and expectations of learners; to develop systematic procedures for identifying target groups and analysing their characteristics; to provide a detailed definition of communication objectives; to design models and materials adapted to different categories and types of learners; to evaluate educational systems and their outcomes; to reconsider the initial and in-service training of language teachers; to encourage applied research into the conditions under which language learning takes place<sup>38</sup>. Moreover, Holec's study "*Learner Autonomy*", which was part of this project, is considered one of the main contributions to the communicative approach to language teaching.

The studies carried out as part of this project had a considerable impact on language policy in Europe, which started being seen as a source of cultural enrichment and a means of removing prejudice and discrimination of all kinds. The recommendations were therefore aimed at diversifying the languages taught in schools and stepping up international visits and exchanges, with the declared aim of modernising the professionalisation of teachers in the field, who were still strongly rooted in classical philology studies. Through this project, an integrative framework was built, principles were enunciated, and reliable methods were developed at pilot level to improve language teaching and learning, with those involved aware that "effective innovation required consensus among examiners, administrators, publishers, inspectors, teacher training institutions, teachers and students, and also sustained effort over a long period of time"<sup>39</sup> In addition to that, the report's conclusions stressed that the success of the recommendations included in the project depended to a large extent on political will<sup>40</sup>. As a result, at the suggestion of the CCC, the Committee of Ministers issued Recommendation R(82)18, recommending to member governments the general reform of modern language teaching, and, following this recommendation, the importance of language learning was at that moment recognised at European level and it started being generally accepted that language teaching and learning should aim to develop communicative competence in the target language<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> J.L.M. Trim, *Modern Languages in the Council of Europe 1954-1997*, Council of Europe, 2007, pp. 23-24, available at <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680886eae>, last time consulted on 6.02.2023.

<sup>39</sup> *Idem*, p. 26.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*.

The progressive intentions of the CoE, expressed most clearly in R(82)18, were embodied in the project '*Learning and teaching modern languages for communication 1982-1987*', which was aimed in particular at the changes made by the Member States in lower secondary education. In this respect, we were witnessing the multiplication of direct contacts between project participants through exchanges of experience and documents, which made an essential contribution to the reform of language education policies in Europe. At the same time, no less than 37 international workshops were organised within the framework of the project, in 15 different countries, to improve the professional development of language specialists in terms of attitudes, knowledge and skills.

Following two intergovernmental symposia, "Language learning in Europe: the challenge of diversity" (Strasbourg, 1988) and "Language learning and teaching methodology for citizenship in a multicultural Europe" (Sintra, 1989), the project "Language Learning for European Citizenship" was launched in 1990 with the aim of developing the principles and models set out in previous projects, giving priority to less researched areas of education and topical issues. This project targeted: primary education, to which attention had been given in 1960<sup>42</sup>; upper secondary education and the interface between pre-university and university education; vocational education, in particular the transition from school to work, advanced adult education based on positive experiences of language learning during compulsory education or in higher or vocational education. The main research topics of this project included: newer and more comprehensive definitions at various levels to take into account recent theoretical developments (the socio-cultural dimension of language learning and teaching); the use of new technologies and media (computer-assisted language learning and exploitation of the opportunities offered by information technology in view of possible access to computers at school or at home); bilingual education; integrating educational links, visits and exchanges into the school curriculum, with particular reference to language learning and teaching; 'learning to learn', helping pupils to acquire the attitudes, knowledge, understanding, skills and strategies needed for lifelong learning; assessment of language skills and learning programmes<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> In the UK, in 1963, an experiment was launched on the teaching of French to primary school pupils through the use of audio-visual courses; the results did not meet the expectations and funding for the project was withdrawn in 1975 (Trim, 2007; Jones&McLachlan, 2009).

<sup>43</sup> M. Byram, *Foreign language learning for European citizenship*, in *The Language Learning Journal*, vol. 6, issue 1, pp. 10-12, 1992.

In order to achieve the proposed objectives and to cover the topics included in this project, 31 workshops were organised between 1990 and 1996. In addition, following the events of 1989-1990 in Central and Eastern Europe, the project "*Language Learning for European Citizenship*" became part of numerous sub-projects with a view to provide the necessary assistance.

Another result of this project between 1990 and 1996 was the development of a level above the Threshold, called Vantage (van Ek and Trim 2001), at the request of adult language teaching institutions. This level differs from the Threshold in that it involves a refinement of notional and functional categories, an enlarged vocabulary, superior control of conversational strategies, greater socio-cultural awareness, increased ability to understand and produce longer and more complex statements, improved skills for reading a variety of texts, etc.

Formally, the project ended in 1996. The final report contains a series of recommendations, mostly taken from the reports of workshops held during the project, aimed at developing new priority areas and topics, addressed to educational authorities in the member countries and language teaching and learning professionals. The report was submitted to the Intergovernmental Conference held in Strasbourg from 15 to 18 April 1997 and, on the basis of reports from member countries<sup>44</sup>, it was shown that the values, objectives and methods proposed and piloted by the CoE since the early 1970s, and even earlier, had been accepted and were in the process of implementation everywhere at national, regional and local level. As a result, member governments could continue to work on developing these directions, especially as from 1994 the European Centre for Modern Languages was inaugurated in Graz (Austria)<sup>45</sup> as an institution of the CoE and which, together with the CoE Language Policy Division, acted as a catalyst for language reform. Moreover, since the Maastricht Treaty (1992), the language policies of the CoE and the EU have started to resemble and have even overlapped as the number of members has increased.

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<sup>44</sup> Delegates representing member governments in the project group were asked to provide information on how the CoE project, *Language learning for European citizenship*, contributed to the promotion of language learning/teaching in their country (Trim, 2007:36).

<sup>45</sup> The European Centre for Modern Languages' mission is to disseminate and implement new language policies, promote dialogue and educational exchanges between different actors in the field, build new networks of specialists and popularise innovative approaches to language learning and teaching.

## Conclusions

EU language policy has been aimed at protecting linguistic diversity and encouraging the acquisition of foreign language skills not only for reasons related to cultural identity and social integration, but also because multilingual citizens are more likely to pursue the educational, professional and economic opportunities offered by an integrated Europe. Thus, the general education and training programmes launched by the EU, its action plans and framework strategies have shared a common goal: to raise public awareness as far as the multiple benefits of foreign language learning are concerned.

According to CoE, the plurilingual and intercultural competence is the ability to use a broad repertoire of linguistic and cultural resources to meet communication needs or to interact with people from other backgrounds and contexts, while enriching it in the process. Plurilingual and intercultural education takes into account the repertoire of languages, as well as the cultures associated with them, which individuals have acquired, with formal recognition in the school curriculum or not – languages of instruction (as a subject or training medium), regional/minority languages, modern and classical foreign languages, languages of immigrants. The CoE has encouraged a holistic approach that develops increased interrelationship between languages, better coordination between teachers, and the exploitation of individuals' transversal skills.

European language policy has evolved progressively and has become increasingly comprehensive, at least in terms of documents. The brief review of the main moments, carried out in this article, shows the extremely complex nature of this policy, to a great extent due to the impressive number of documents drafted at the initiative of the CoE and/or the EU. The influence of these documents on language practice is markedly visible in foreign language methodology and assessment: worldwide language teachers have enthusiastically embraced the communicative approach, and the Common European Framework for Languages has become the reference point in assessment scales in Europe and beyond. Thus, it can be said that the efforts made by the CoE, and subsequently by the EU, have had beneficial results on language teaching and learning. Further research might focus on issues related to multilingualism and plurilingualism, as these are the direct result of the foreign language education policy pursued by the EU and the CoE.

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