

EDITORIAL

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Youth, Education and Erasmus+
Schools and multilingualism

How linguistic diversity makes the case for language awareness *A short background to the proposed EU Recommendation*

It is a great pleasure for me to introduce this special edition of the Journal of e-Learning and Knowledge Society, devoted mainly to the European Commission's latest initiative in the field of multilingualism. The proposal for a Council Recommendation on a comprehensive approach to language teaching and learning¹ (henceforth "the language Recommendation") was launched by the European Commission in May 2018. It is currently being negotiated with the Council of Ministers with a view to having it adopted in May 2019. Let us take a brief look at the challenges and opportunities at EU level that provide the backdrop to the language learning Recommendation.

Seventy million Europeans lack adequate reading and writing skills. At the same time, an increasing number of pupils are learning the language(s) of schooling as (a) foreign language(s) in school. On 1 January 2017, there were 36.9 million people born outside of the EU-28 living in an EU Member State, while there were 20.4 million persons who had been born in a different EU Member State from the one where they were resident². The increased mobility between EU countries and the rising number of third country migrants and refugees coming to the EU in recent years has contributed to greater (linguistic) diversity in European classrooms.

Most EU education systems today provide systematic support for school pupils with migrant background, to acquire adequate levels of the language of

¹ [Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a comprehensive approach to language teaching and learning, COM/2018/272 final](#)

² [Eurostat: Migration and migrant population statistics](#), edition March 2018

their new host country. This is one of the findings in the latest Key Data on language teaching at school in Europe³, a periodical publication by the European Commission's Eurydice Network, which is exploring and analysing education systems across Europe.

There is also evidence that the foreign language teaching in many Member States fail to yield the intended results. In spite of the fact that the first foreign language is gradually introduced at an earlier stage (at primary level in a majority of EU Member States), the level reached by the end of secondary education is not always sufficient for further studies or professional use. The first (foreign) language learned is generally English, even if it is not compulsory as a first choice in all countries. If a second foreign language is taught in school, the level of ambition is even lower. Few countries have provisions for mother tongue support for learners with a different first language than the language of schooling. Therefore, a lack of multilingual competences is still an obstacle to further learning, as well as to learning mobility for young people.

In terms of language learning policy, the migration crises has in fact provided a new impetus for education reforms at national level. Increased linguistic diversity in schools across Europe has put the spotlight on the necessity for various aspects of language awareness, several of which are discussed in this publication.

On 14 November 2017, the European Commission adopted a Communication⁴, which sets out the vision for a European Education Area by 2025. Its ambition is to provide all European citizens, but especially young people, with access to high quality education. The essence of this strategy, including the need to boost language teaching and learning in Europe, was endorsed by the European Heads of State and Government at their Summit in Brussels in December 2017⁵.

A first step in this direction was taken through the revised Key Competences Framework⁶ including new, more inclusive definitions of literacy and languages. These concepts are developed further in the language Recommendation. The Recommendation embraces the concept of "language-awareness in schools", which is not new, but has taken on a new meaning in the context of increased diversity and the need to re-think language education in schools in Europe. The concept includes recognition of the multilingual competences of all pupils, including competences in languages that are not taught in their schools. Schools may distinguish between different levels of language competences needed, depending on context and purpose and corresponding to every

³ European Commission – Eurydice: [Key Data on teaching languages at school in Europe](#), 2017 edition

⁴ [Strengthening European identity through education and culture](#) – the European Commission's contribution to the Leaders' meeting in Gothenburg, COM/2017/673 final

⁵ [European Council Conclusions](#) 14 December 2017

⁶ Revised [Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning](#), COM/2018/024 final

learner's circumstances, needs, abilities and interests.

In the process leading up to the publication of the language Recommendation the European Commission organised a number of thematic workshops and peer learning activities⁷ on the subject of “rethinking literacies and language learning”⁸. These workshops brought together academics, European and national experts in the areas of multilingualism, key competences and the integration of migrants, and representatives of the policy networks ELINET⁸, SIRIUS⁹ and KeyCoNet¹⁰.

It is important to stress that literacy deficiency is not primarily a concern for migrant students or more generally for students from a disadvantaged socio-economic background. There are large numbers of students with reading and writing difficulties from all strands of society. Understanding the reasons for this and devising remedies, promoting reading alongside the use of digital media are universal challenges that go hand in hand with the development of multilingual competences.

The key to success is partly to use ICT in education in such a way that interest in reading, writing, speaking and understanding different languages is stimulated and openness and curiosity fostered. The success of eTwinning¹¹ shows that there are many creative and committed teachers throughout Europe who are able to make a tremendous difference by introducing innovative teaching methods.

Content and Language Integrated Learning, CLIL, is discussed in several articles in this publication. Through the diversity of Europe's multilingual classrooms, this proven methodology takes on a partly new role, in the context of young migrants learning the language of schooling.

The ambition at European level to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of language education at school, is part of the wider picture of transforming schools into learning organizations within school education as a learning system. In the context of the European framework for cooperation in Education and Training (ET2020)¹² and especially in the context of the Working Group on Schools, the Commission facilitates the exchange of good practices and experiences among Member States. The Working Group has just published a report with the title “European ideas for better learning: the governance of school education systems”. The work involved close collaboration by governmental

⁷ European Commission web page on [multilingual classrooms](#) and on [education and migrants](#)

⁸ [European Literacy policy network ELINET](#)

⁹ [SIRIUS policy network on migrant education](#)

¹⁰ [European policy network](#) promoting the implementation of the Key Competence Framework in primary and secondary school education

¹¹ [eTwinning – the community of schools in Europe](#)

¹² [Current Working Groups](#) under the Strategic Framework for Cooperation in Education and Training until 2020 (ET2020)

policymakers and education stakeholders in a series of meetings and peer learning events over the course of two years.

My colleague Hannah Grainger Clemson, who is the coordinator of the Working Group, introduces the report and explains the Group's working methods in a recent article¹³ in the Learning for Wellbeing Magazine.

Another forum for good practices and expert contributions in the field of school education in general and language teaching and learning in particular is the School Education Gateway¹⁴, an electronic exchange platform for people active in the area of school education.

One nice aspect of our policy work in the European Commission is that we are able to bring together experts from different disciplines, both researchers and practitioners. Such meetings can create interesting cross-fertilisation between projects and amplify the impact of the collaborative work. In some rare cases, it can even lead to unexpected off-spring results. One prominent example is the cooperation between Dina Mehmedbegovic from the Institute of Education at University College London and Thomas Bak from the University of Edinburgh. Their combined expertise and advocacy for openness to languages in all forms, shapes and colours, is shared through their web site Healthy Linguistic Diet¹⁵.

The reports¹⁶ summarising the preparatory work being carried out by the European Commission, its research networks and other consultants are all available for downloading. Along with research magazines such as this one, they will feed into the broad policy debate about the future of language teaching and learning, which will be triggered by the Council Recommendation.

I am immensely grateful for the tireless commitment and enthusiasm of Letizia Cinganotto, who will never leave any stone unturned in her quest for progress through the power of European collaboration. She initiated this special issue of the Journal and chased down some of the best pens in Europe and beyond to discuss various aspects of the Commission's Recommendation from their respective angles. My heartfelt thanks go to all of the contributors, who agreed to submit brilliant articles, which will enrich the scientific and public debate about language teaching and learning for years to come.

In summary, there is a multitude of interesting work going on at local, national, regional, European and international level. Through the current top level policy priorities to support the integration of migrants and to create a

¹³ [Learning communities: Supporting change in European school education](#)

¹⁴ [School Education Gateway](#) – language learning on Europe's online platform for school education

¹⁵ [Healthy Linguistic Diet](#) – think tank and discussion forum about language learning

¹⁶ [Language teaching and learning in multilingual classrooms](#)
[Rethinking language education and linguistic diversity in Europe](#)
[Migrants in European schools – learning and maintaining languages](#)

well functioning European Education Area there is a wide open window of opportunity to create real change in the way in which we achieve good levels of literacy and multilingual competences for everybody!

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