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Language Policy Division

Plurilingual and intercultural education as a project

Concerning some feasibility conditions for plurilingual and intercultural education

Language Policy Division
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This text addresses some issues related to the feasibility of plurilingual and intercultural education at different levels (national, regional, local) and is directed specifically to deciders at each of these levels. Aspects of feasibility sketched briefly here will be taken up again and dealt with in depth by other texts later. It is however important to begin to consider the minimal conditions and the necessary stages which have to be followed in order to gradually construct a plurilingual and intercultural education.

List of contents

This reflection on some of the feasibility conditions for plurilingual and intercultural education will concentrate on five successive phases: official instructions at the central level, analysis of the sociolinguistic context, curricular construction, implementation of the plurilingual and intercultural curriculum, school personnel education.

1. Official instructions at central level

Plurilingual and intercultural education as it is conceived on this Platform is the result of a central political will except in education systems where each school has a very wide margin of autonomy. This political will may be expressed in official instructions that determine from central level (whether national or regional level or a combination of the two) the choices to be made at a more local level.

It is argued here that plurilingual and intercultural education is above all a recognition and development of existing societal multilingualism and individual plurilingualism, that it sets itself objectives of education and training based on values promoted by the Council of Europe with a view to social consequences such as the development of democratic citizenship, social cohesion and positive attitudes towards diversity. If one of its aims is to expand individual repertoires through teaching, which does not concern only a small privileged elite but the whole school population, it is evident that plurilingual and intercultural education can only be the outcome of a deliberate policy and of a conscious, coherent and concrete commitment by policymakers. This does not mean that localised experiences cannot precede, lead to and inspire more "central" initiatives and decisions, nor that these must therefore affect the education system as a whole.

It is nonetheless clear that the input given by a central authority strongly influences developments at a 'lower' level. If the vision coming from above is inspired by a 'monolingual' vision of language education that the school is expected to deliver or by a vision which is only instrumental and functional. then it may be more difficult if not impossible at other levels to implement a plurilingual and intercultural education of this kind.

2. Analysis of the sociolinguistic context

Intervention in a school's language curriculum is among the most powerful and effective language policy measures for guaranteeing a future for the languages which are (or will be) taught there. That is why the relevant decisions should be based on a clear-sighted analysis of the prevailing sociolinguistic context at the level concerned: national, regional or local (= town or school).

To do this two types of data are fundamental:
- *quantitative data* on the demographics of the languages present and spoken on a particular territory, number of speakers, status of those languages etc; this type of data also includes analysis of socio-economic language needs for the short, medium and long terms (see paragraph 2.1 above);
- *social representations* attaching to the languages in a given context, since it is the private and "subjective" experiences of the speakers of those languages which counts rather than the actual and "objective" weight of each of them. Social representations exert a considerable influence on the choices and/or motivations of the various parties involved in education (teachers, learners, parents, public opinion/media, the employment market and... decision-makers).

Reference Document

For a discussion of the data necessary for an analysis of a sociolinguistic context see:

- ■ BEACCO, J.-C. and BYRAM, M. (2007) : 'Data and methods for the development of language education policies'. Part 2 (Chapters 3 and 4) of the *Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe,* Council of Europe, Language Policy Division, Strasbourg
- ■ CASTELLOTTI, V. and MOORE, D. (2002). *Social Representations of Languages and Teaching,* Reference Study. Language Policy Division, Council of Europe, Strasbourg

3. Curricular construction

The foregoing observations provide the elements needed to construct a plurilingual and intercultural curriculum capable of meeting the specific requirements of a given context:

- the components (i.e. languages and their status, but also other subjects) and requirements vary widely from one context to another, and therefore the solutions adopted will also vary. These variations may occur both between different contexts and within the same context. The same components may give rise to widely differing solutions depending both on the policy choices made at different levels in respect of the desired educational goals and on the opportunities provided by the context itself or the type of constraints it embodies (e.g. human resources, budgetary and other constraints);
- the concept of *curricular scenario[1]* is a tool which may help decision-makers to take informed language education policy decisions. The implementation of plurilingual and intercultural education can be viewed in terms of flexibility and change within the framework of these scenarios.

Reference Document

For the notion of scenario, see:

- ■ *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*, Council of Europe/Cambridge University Press, 2001
- ■ COSTE, D. (ed.) CAVALLI, M., CRIŞAN, A and VEN , P.-H., van de (2007) : *A European reference document for languages of education?* Part 3.4.2 "Curriculum scenarios and plurilingual education", Language Policy Division, Council of Europe, Strasbourg

- While plurilingual and intercultural education can accommodate the complexity resulting from language diversity and plurality, it must not represent an additional burden of work: means and methods exist of making economies and working towards rationalisation;
- Each context also requires a different entry into plurilingual and intercultural education: some contexts are more suitable for direct entry into plurilingualism via the language of schooling; for others, it may be more appropriate to introduce it via foreign languages (see paragraph 3.1).

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[1] "Goal-oriented curricular scenario " means a conceptual tool that can be used to think out the construction of the curricula of all languages at school from an overall perspective, while ensuring continuity and pursuing educational goals clearly defined beforehand. See Chapter 8 of the CEFR. LINK

- Lastly, it should be stressed, that while the school is the obvious institution for language teaching, expectations regarding its action must be based on healthy realism and be seen in the language field as a certainly essential but not final stage in a learning path that should last a lifetime.

4. Implementation of a plurilingual and intercultural curriculum

While it is important for the plurilingual and intercultural curriculum to be properly thought out and designed in a manner that is relevant to, and consistent with, a given context, its success depends equally on how it is applied at the various levels: school organisation, classroom implementation and the immediate environment. Although not intended to be exhaustive, this section will stress a number of points for each of these different levels.

4.1 School level

A language education policy is also (chiefly?) implemented at the local level and doubtless more effectively and in a more contextualised way than at other levels, as the school is able to target its action at a specific environment and its particular needs. The school's language policy must guarantee a fair balance between each pupil's language rights, the language needs of the society at large and the necessary diversification of the educational offer available.

- In this local framework, the importance of the principal/headteacher and of the measures taken by the school (school arrangements - school improvements) are important for the success of a plurilingual and intercultural curriculum: this requires a commitment by the principal to his or her various roles, namely local decision-maker, promoter of change and catalyst of innovation responsible not only for management but particularly also for the deployment and motivation of human resources etc;

- It is at this level that it is important to ensure that resources of all kinds are really available in the knowledge that plurilingual and intercultural education is not necessarily expensive if practised according to the various possible options: the models and methods available for this type of education are numerous and highly varied and do not all require a heavy investment in human and/or budgetary resources and/or in training;

- This is also the level at which a decision must be taken, together with the regional and national levels, on the question of assessing plurilingual and intercultural competence through self-assessment by the learners themselves with the use of Portfolios and teacher guidance, through summative assessment for certification by an institution (local or state examinations) or through the provision of references or certificates that can be useful for finding employment.

4.2 Classroom level

It is here that plurilingual and intercultural education is specifically and directly implemented:

- the role of the school, the teacher and his/her teaching occupies a central place in the creation and implementation of *experiences and activities for learning* which are significant for the learner; it is here that different types of scenario directed towards plurilingual and intercultural education may be implemented in concrete terms (see section 3 above)

- the creation of a genuine *motivation for lifelong learning* represents one of the school's essential duties, contrary to certain perfectionist views of the acquisition of languages at school, thanks to which pupils are often put off languages and language learning for good;

- in cases where it is not (yet) possible to have teachers with good language skills (e.g. where the teaching of a new foreign language is just beginning or bilingual teaching of subjects is introduced), it should be borne in mind that, as various experiences have shown, a degree of linguistic insecurity can play quite a positive role if a view of the classroom as a place for co-operative learning is adopted; it is clear that this requires less asymmetric conceptions of the respective roles of teacher and learner;
- the wealth and diversity of the "language sources" currently available (ICT, creation of networks, virtual or otherwise, by using the Internet, exchanges, courses etc) mean that teachers are not the only language models that learners encounter in class.

4.3   Relations between the school and the environment

At the local level, it is in the school's interest to operate as a deeply rooted part of its immediate environment, with which, in implementing plurilingual and intercultural education, it should interact through variously targeted actions:
- relations with the media and public opinion with a view to the provision of accurate information about plurilingual and intercultural education, its aims and social challenges; information campaigns concerning and promoting plurilingualism, the use of key witnesses, and measures to encourage certain media to move towards linguistic diversity are among the actions which could be promoted by school;
- the community and parents could become active partners in preserving languages of origin, in co-operation with the school in the course of activities seeking to illustrate concretely the diversity of languages and of experience of languages;
- the school could arrange courses in the language of schooling aimed at adult foreigners and foreign-language courses for workers on the basis of the needs defined by the latter and/or by businesses.

5.   Teacher education

The training of principals of schools is strategically important in any plurilingual and intercultural education project. The central significance of their role in language education policy at the level of the school has been emphasised above (see 4.1). and they need to receive information and even be offered appropriately related training.

The vital role of teachers in the success of plurilingual and intercultural education is equally evident. Training for teachers of languages of schooling of foreign modern and classical languages could include:
- *a common part* dealing with all the cross-cutting dimensions of language education[2];
- *a specific part* covering particular aspects of the teaching of each language;

The training of teachers of every school subject should not neglect to take full account of the language, discursive, semiotic dimensions etc of the subject they teach in the main language of schooling, nor the specific contributions that each subject can make to learners' intercultural education.

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[2] The contents of which could consist, inter alia, of the following: a "scientific" conception of language, psycholinguistic aspects, language learning and teaching, plurilingualism teaching - i.e. the integrated teaching of languages, plural and partial approaches, integration between languages and subject content etc - which affect both languages of schooling and foreign languages and, in some cases, other subjects as well. Content could also include the elements of sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, language policy, neurosciences and other pertinent scientific areas.

In the case of bilingual/plurilingual teaching, specific training specially adapted to the chosen model would be needed in the best methods of turning the various languages used in knowledge construction into educational and cognitive assets.

As regards forms of bilingual teaching of subjects, stress should be placed on the desirability of having this type of plurilingual experience provided by non-native teachers who, because of their linguistic situation, are often more aware of the challenges of this type of teaching and readier to extract from it the greatest possible advantage; plurilingual and intercultural education does not require teachers who are "perfect" bilinguals themselves, or indeed exceptional plurilinguals!

Such training in plurilingual and intercultural education can only benefit from action research by teachers in their classes at school level.

6. Conclusions

The purpose of this text has been to analyse **plurilingual and intercultural education** as an open process of constructing appropriate curricula. Within this framework, certain conditions of feasibility have been presented for consideration by deciders at different levels. Plurilingual and intercultural education may at first sight seem utopian in its principles, and complex in its implementation. The response to this is to emphasise that, in education, utopia always remains a condition for realistic innovations. This paradigm shift does not imply that everything must be raised immediately and simultaneously. An analysis of the current situation, of the opportunities and constraints which need to be taken into consideration – including those created by dominant representations of languages and knowledge of them – will lead to the establishment of immediate priorities without abandoning more ambitious aims.