



Seminar on  
*The language dimension in all subjects*

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# Report

By

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## Introduction

The seminar brought together eighteen invited participants from thirteen countries to share perspectives and experience on the language dimension in all subjects. The main focus was the draft Handbook written by the seminar coordinating team. The aim was to draw on the expertise of the participants to gain understanding of the potential challenges in implementing the recommendations of the Handbook, and to gather suggestions for any measures that might support its implementation. A further aim was to receive feedback on the content and presentation of the Handbook, and to learn how the language dimension in teaching and learning subjects is currently taken into account in different contexts. The seminar was successful and thought-provoking. The wide range of expertise amongst the participants (including perspectives from teacher education, classroom practice, text book publishing, education ministries and curriculum development, language and research centres) meant that the discussion was informed and rich.

## Context

Prior to the start of the seminar, participants were invited to send a brief written account on how the language dimension in teaching and learning subjects is taken into account in their particular context and how far it affects curriculum development, textbooks and teacher education. There is clearly considerable variation in different countries and across regions but there are encouraging signs of a growing awareness of the importance of taking a broad approach to language education, and examples of positive initiatives in different contexts. Where national curricula have been reformed or are being revised, there is likely to be more awareness of the importance of plurilingual and intercultural education. There were examples of language elements being introduced into the curriculum through a transversal framework of key skills or through embedding language awareness and language-sensitive practices as underpinning principles of the curriculum. Often the drive to acknowledge the language dimension in subjects is driven by second language learning as well as by content and language integrated learning approaches (CLIL), although the approaches vary across countries. At the level of pre-service and in-service teacher education, a number of initiatives were reported, including: the development of literacy booster modules for teachers; collaborative work between language and subject teachers and the development of interdisciplinary modules; the use of a specific task force to support embedded language teaching; curriculum projects with different subject teachers; publication of documents to support teacher training; modules in second language learning promoting language competences in subject classrooms.

Despite several positive initiatives and growing awareness of the importance of the language dimension in subject teaching, there is clearly a long way to go in most contexts as indicated in the feedback: 'the language dimension is still not integrated into all teacher training courses and rarely fully integrated into subject-specific attainment goals'; 'few materials have been published'; 'awareness of the language dimension in school subjects other than languages is

very low'; 'language is often neglected in subject classrooms with lack of awareness of how language is inextricably linked with conceptual learning'; 'subject teachers are becoming more aware but they find it hard to develop strategies for implementation in their own lessons'; 'teachers do have a clear understanding that the issue is important and do also feel responsible for it, but feel unprepared and lack approaches'; 'subject teachers' language awareness is still very thin and models for language-sensitive practices are rare'.

## Background

The official opening of the seminar drew attention to the 2014 Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 'the importance of competences on the language(s) of schooling for equity and quality in education and for educational success'<sup>1</sup> as an important landmark in the work of the Language Policy Unit and stimulus for the development of the Handbook. The current focus on the languages of schooling is a response to the priorities set by the Heads of State and Government at a Council of Europe Summit in 2005 concerning social inclusion and cohesion. The Recommendation on the importance of competences in the language(s) of schooling complements a previous Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers on 'ensuring quality education'<sup>2</sup>.

A brief overview of the first five decades of Council of Europe work on language education policy and practice, to be seen in the frame of the European Cultural Convention<sup>3</sup> (1954), in particular its Article 2 about learning and teaching the languages of other contracting parties for a greater understanding of one another among the peoples of Europe, highlighted the development of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR). Work in the field of foreign/second languages as well as in the field of the language(s) of schooling is seen in a perspective of plurilingual and intercultural education.

The relationship of the Handbook to the *Platform of resources and references for plurilingual and intercultural education*<sup>4</sup> was described and the inevitable challenge in writing a single document that was intended for a wide audience. The opening session constituted a reminder that, although the Handbook has a strong practical orientation, it is grounded in values and principles.

## Facing the challenges

Discussion focused on the main challenges for implementation with reference to curriculum, classroom practice, teacher education and textbook development. There have been previous historical attempts in different countries to develop approaches to 'language across the curriculum' but these have largely been unsuccessful. The initial focus on 'challenges' at the seminar was intended to be realistic rather than defeatist.

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<sup>1</sup> [Recommendation CM/Rec \(2014\)5](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Recommendation \(2012\)13](#)

<sup>3</sup> [European Cultural Convention](#) (1954)

<sup>4</sup> [www.coe.int/lang-platform](http://www.coe.int/lang-platform)

One of the key challenges is how to reach teachers of subjects, other than those traditionally designated as language teachers, at both school and teacher education level. If the language dimension is promoted it tends to be done so by language specialists but it is more difficult to see its importance from a subject perspective. Subject teachers may feel that what is being required is either an additional, unnecessary burden or something that is already being addressed implicitly in their teaching. It is important therefore for advocates of language education to be able to de-centre and see things from the subject teachers' point of view. This has implications for communication with subject teachers, particularly at school level. It is important not to face subject teachers with too much technical terminology, giving the impression that they need to acquire a great deal of linguistic knowledge beyond their subject expertise. The need for empirical research was identified in order to convince the large body of diverse stake-holders that are likely to be involved. The need for teaching examples and models of how to operationalise the practical recommendations was also identified. Without concrete examples, subject teachers may find it hard to see what is meant by 'language sensitive teaching'.

The approach to text books varies in different countries. In some cases they are approved at national level, other countries use a system of endorsement, and yet others leave decisions about choice of textbooks entirely to schools. The language of text books often lacks authenticity and the tasks are often not well-constructed with little attention to the specific role of language in subject learning. The importance of high quality texts books in supporting pedagogy and creating coherence between national curricula and teaching was acknowledged. In general the best text books do try to follow the latest developments in pedagogy but it remains a significant challenge to ensure that text books address the language dimension in subject teaching. One issue is how to raise the awareness of text book authors of the importance of the language dimension.

There is a challenge in how language aspects should be embedded in the curriculum. A general framework running parallel with the specific subject curriculum has the advantage of clearly identifying transversal competencies that should be relevant to all subjects, but runs the risk of not being fully integrated by subject teachers. There was a strong view that embedding the language dimension into the individual subject curriculum would have more chance of ensuring that teachers and text book authors respond to the challenge. Including the language dimension in the national curriculum is a necessary but not sufficient condition for raising standards in language education. Assessment is an additional factor to be considered (whether for example language elements should be explicitly taken into account) as it has such a significant impact on the way subjects are taught. Both pre-service and in-service teacher education are crucial, although in many contexts resources for this kind of work are limited. Teacher educators may see this as an additional burden to add to their other extensive responsibilities. At school and classroom level the challenge of creating the right atmosphere and attitudes was identified. This means, for example, creating a context in which awareness of language is high, learners have an enquiring attitude to language and are ready to take risks and make mistakes.

## Language sensitive teaching

For the first group discussion, three different classroom texts and tasks from different subjects (Science, Geography, and History) were scrutinised in order to identify the language difficulties that might confront students with different language biographies. These texts/tasks were drawn from different age groups (primary, mid-secondary, higher secondary) and were accompanied by an extract from the national curriculum of three different countries from which the text/tasks were drawn. These extracts were provided so that groups could examine whether the national curriculum text provided any indication for subject teachers on how to focus on the language dimension of subject teaching. Discussion in the groups was detailed and inevitably varied from group to group but some broad themes emerged: the curriculum extracts gave little or no explicit attention to language; the tasks were ill-conceived with insufficient clarity on what was required in terms of outcomes (oral or written, type of genre required etc.); the relationships between the text and tasks was not sufficiently clear; no structured support was provided for reading the texts. It was clear that the design of the tasks in some cases was well-intended, trying to engage the students' interest but in all cases the examples were of poor practice, giving students insufficient guidance.

Given the importance of the effective setting of tasks in teaching, it was thought that this might be a useful focus for subject teachers as a 'way in' to language issues. It might be more appealing for subjects teachers to be offered support with a specific pedagogical activity such as 'setting tasks' rather than only focusing in the first instance on 'the language dimension' *per se*.

## Feedback on Handbook and strategies for implementation

The second group work was a more open-ended discussion specifically on the Handbook and on strategies for implementing its recommendations. Although the Handbook is near completion with little time for major revisions before its launch at the inter-governmental conference in October, it was thought that specific feedback on the content of the Handbook, no matter how far-reaching, could feed into further editions. The Handbook was generally welcomed as there is a need for a text of this kind to raise awareness of the issues. However there were comments about its tone, accessibility, layout and practical orientation. It was thought that the Handbook might have presented the case for addressing the language dimension in subjects more robustly, with supporting statistics and, if possible, research evidence. A clear message rather than a description of different options might have more impact. Questions were raised about whether key target groups would have the time to read such a long, fairly demanding document, with the suggestion that one, or more, shorter versions should be provided. The text could be made more attractive with better layout and design and perhaps questions for consideration at the end of chapters. The term 'Handbook' might suggest to some readers a 'hands-on' text with examples, or else a more modular text. More practical, real-life examples drawn from the classroom would be a useful supplementary publication; for the on-line version more examples could be made accessible with hyper-links (including to video extracts). Other

practical measures to support implementation included the following suggestions: strategies for facilitating cooperation between subject and language specialists should be developed to promote the integration of subject, language and pedagogy; the Language Policy Unit might focus on developing language orientated descriptors in one subject such as history perhaps in cooperation with the Council of Europe history team; user guides, action plans and perhaps ready-made power-point presentations should be developed for specific stakeholders e.g. head teachers. It was felt that further work and sharing of experiences across countries on literacy coaches would be helpful. Links to the Council of Europe Pestalozzi programme on teacher education was suggested. It was thought that the platform could support the Handbook with links to national initiatives and examples of good practice

### Conclusion and ways forward

The seminar was a valuable event not just for developing ideas for taking the project forward but also for networking and providing an opportunity for participants to share important work that is being undertaken in their different contexts. Some of the key insights that emerged from the seminar can be summarised as follows.

*The need to de-centre and see things from the subject perspective.* This has implications for the approach to addressing language-related descriptors in national curricula for these are more likely to be effective if integrated into subject curricula. There is clearly a tension here because the need to identify transversal competences as these become apparent is also likely to emerge as an issue. There are also implications for communication with subject teachers and the need to avoid too much specialist, technical language. Approaching the topic with subject teachers through pedagogical challenges e.g. 'the effective setting of tasks' was thought to be a helpful way forward. Other similar teaching topics include: dealing with texts in the classroom, checking understanding in the classroom, learning through writing, how to support classroom interaction.

*The importance of the concept of integration that can be applied to several aspects of the project.* The concept of 'integration' applies to the close connection between language and cognition which is a key theoretical foundation of the work. However there is clearly another associated meaning in that, although the language aspects of learning a subject need to be identified and not left implicit, it is important that they are fully integrated and not seen as an additional burden or artificial 'extra'. Cooperation and joint ventures between language and subject teachers have considerable possibilities and can be seen as another form of integration. Strategies to convince subject teachers of the value of such cooperation will need to be well prepared and implemented.

*The publication of the Handbook can be seen as a valuable but not, by itself, sufficient step in addressing fully the language dimension in all subjects.* When complete, the Handbook has the potential to serve as a solid, detailed point of reference that makes the case for the importance of language in an in-depth manner. However to ensure it has impact on practice, there is a need for supplementary materials and activities such as practical, real examples of language-sensitive

teaching, condensed versions of the Handbook, support materials for teacher education. The seminar participants are clearly engaging in many important, relevant projects and it is hoped that they will continue to act as advocates in their contexts for the importance of the language dimension in all subjects.

From the wide-ranging discussions there were implications for action points for the next stage of the project:

- Publish a shorter (perhaps 12-15 pages) document that summarizes the Handbook. This would be in the form of an 'executive summary' (but perhaps a little longer than a document of that kind would normally be) so that the document stays clear and accessible to many but the main messages are not diluted;
- Consider other versions of shorter length (like in the case of the CEFR) for specific groups of readers and stakeholders;
- Collect real examples from the classroom of language-sensitive teaching in subjects in the form of audio recordings/transcripts or video recordings so that these can be linked to an on-line version of the Handbook (the seminar participants might be able to help with this work);
- Raise the awareness of text book authors and publishers on the importance of the language dimension through a specially designated conference;
- Prepare a sample module for training literacy coaches with a clear definition of what the role entails;
- Raise the awareness of policy makers concerning the importance of introducing the language dimension as a mandatory element of (initial) teacher training;
- Prepare a guide to developing, setting and evaluating effective tasks for learning in subjects, with an integrated perspective on the language dimension. Such a guide could draw on work developed within the project "Language(s) in Education, Language(s) for Education";
- Bring together the results of the different actions after an appropriate period of time (e.g. after one or two years) by way of a critical strategic conference, to be held either in Strasbourg or in a member state;
- Develop a general framework and, subsequently, descriptors for subject literacy competences; in this work, professional disciplinary identity and authenticity should be strongly in evidence.



## PROGRAMME

Wednesday 27 May 2015	
08.30 - 09.00	Registration
09.00 - 9.45	<p>OFFICIAL OPENING</p> <p>Welcome address and introduction to the seminar - Johanna Panthier / Villano Qiriazì</p> <p>Background of the Handbook on <i>The language dimension in all subjects</i> -Jean-Claude Beacco</p>
9.45 - 11.00	<p>GENERAL DISCUSSION - Chair: Helmut Vollmer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participants introduce themselves.</li> </ul> <p>The following questions will be addressed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>How is the language dimension in teaching and learning subjects taken into account in your context and how far does it affect curriculum development, textbooks and teacher education?</i></li> <li>- <i>Would the Handbook be useful to improve the quality of teaching/learning in your context?</i></li> </ul>
11.00 -11.30	<i>Coffee break</i>
11.30 - 12.30	<p>GUIDED DISCUSSION (by Mike Fleming)</p> <p><i>What are the main challenges for implementation in your system considering: curriculum, classroom practice, teacher education, textbook development?</i></p>
12.30 - 14.00	<i>Lunch</i>
14.00 - 14.15	INTRODUCTION TO GROUP WORK - Eike Thürmann
14.15 - 16.15	<p>GROUP WORK: WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE A LANGUAGE SENSITIVE TEACHER?</p> <p>Working on examples of attainment targets for reading comprehension, writing and interaction/meaning making</p> <p>Attainment targets, tasks and texts for the following subjects are distributed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sciences / Biology</li> <li>- History</li> <li>- Social sciences</li> </ul>
16.15 - 17.00	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Coffee break</i></p> <p>(and time for the rapporteurs of group work to prepare for the plenary session in which they will be asked to summarise the discussions and for the coordinators to exchange about their experiences in the groups)</p>
17.00 - 18.00	<p>DISCUSSION ON GROUP WORK OUTCOMES - Chair: Jean-Claude Beacco</p> <p>Presentation of reports by the 3 groups</p> <p>Synthesis and further comments on group work by Eike Thürmann and Helmut Vollmer</p>

Thursday 28 May 2015	
09.00 - 09.15	INTRODUCTION TO GROUP WORK - Mike Fleming
09.15 - 11.00	<p>BRAINSTORMING WORKSHOP (IN GROUPS):</p> <p>Strategies of implementation at the level of curriculum development, teacher education, actions at school and classroom level:</p> <p><i>What advice could you give to the Council of Europe to support member states in implementing the measures proposed in the Recommendation and further developed in the Handbook? For example:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>How can we make the Handbook more accessible to different stakeholders? And what follow-up do you see to it in operational terms?</i></li> <li>- <i>What can be achieved through the sharing of curricula and other relevant material on the Platform of resources and references for plurilingual and intercultural education?</i></li> <li>- <i>What can be achieved through an intergovernmental conference (planned for October 2015) with delegates from all CoE member states?</i></li> </ul>
-	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Coffee break</i></p> <p>(and time for rapporteurs of group work to prepare for the plenary session in which they will be asked to summarise the discussions and for coordinators to exchange about their experiences in the groups)</p>
11.45 - 12.45	<p>PRESENTATION OF REPORTS BY THE 3 GROUPS - Chair: Mike Fleming</p> <p>Interaction with the authors of the Handbook</p>
12.45 - 13.00	Closing the seminar - Johanna Panthier

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