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## The Aims of Language Teaching and Learning

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## Introduction

The Languages in and for Education project has at its centre a commitment to an integrated approach to language teaching and learning. This means that in a school context all teachers whether of language of schooling taught as subject<sup>1</sup>, second/foreign languages or other curriculum subjects have both a vested interest in and a responsibility for the pupils' development of language competence.<sup>2</sup> This principle has been reiterated in a number of documents related to the Language in and for Education project and has far-reaching theoretical and related practical implications.<sup>3</sup> From a theoretical perspective an integrated approach to language education reinforces the links between language and such general aims as education for active, responsible participatory citizenship and personal growth. From a practical perspective it highlights the need for teachers to work together to make sure that their work in the classroom is not pulling in different directions. To achieve this goal it is helpful to reflect on the degree to which teachers have common goals with regard to language development and to what degree, if at all, their purposes differ. The aims of language education have been discussed in some detail in previous papers related to the project and it is not the intention of this paper to present new arguments. Its purpose is rather to explore some of the implications of the position outlined in previous papers and to spell out some of the implicit assumptions and contrary views. It is also not the intention to discuss in detail the aims of language as subject and foreign language learning. This discussion has also been undertaken elsewhere in relation to the project.<sup>4</sup> The focus in this paper is rather on the general principles. The first part of the paper will discuss the aims of language as subject and foreign language teaching, focusing on the flaws involved in a particular view that stresses their differences rather than commonalities. The paper will then go on to consider aims as they relate to the teaching in/of minority languages and language in other subjects, again stressing the need to identify common goals.

## Language as subject and foreign language teaching

This section will examine what might be termed a 'traditional' perspective on the contrasting aims of language as subject and foreign language education in order to highlight the limitations of that view. It is not a conception of aims that many contemporary foreign language specialists would subscribe to but it is a view which is often prevalent outside this specialist field and therefore needs to be addressed. In broad summary, it places considerable emphasis on the difference between first and foreign language acquisition, ascribing broad educational aims to first language acquisition and narrow, more functional aims to foreign language learning. (It is not the intention in this paper to make a particular distinction between the concepts of language 'learning' and 'acquisition'). It is widely accepted by teachers of language as subject that language has a special role in the personal and social development of the learner. Language is seen not only as a tool for communication but as a key focus for the development of thinking, identity and personal

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<sup>1</sup> This concept refers to languages taught as subjects in their own right, for example, Polish in Poland, Swedish in Sweden, German in the schools of the German minority in Denmark etc).

<sup>2</sup> The term 'foreign language' is sometimes equated with and sometimes distinguished from 'second language' This is not the place to discuss the issues at length and in this text the term 'foreign language' will be used as a cover term, making reference to specifically second language issues if they arise.

<sup>3</sup> Cavalli, M., Coste, D., Crisan, A. and Van de Ven, P. Plurilingual and Intercultural Education as a Project. [http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/Default\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/Default_en.asp)

<sup>4</sup> Aase, L. Aims in the Teaching/Learning of Language(s) of Education. [http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/Default\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/Default_en.asp)

growth. The development of the child and the growth of language go hand in hand in what is often seen as a natural process. These insights are readily applied to first language acquisition and by association to language as subject. In contrast foreign language acquisition is often seen in more functional terms – foreign language learning has traditionally been seen as less deeply transformational with a sole emphasis on communication rather than individual and social growth. To put it fairly crudely, pupils have developed and are developing as human beings through their first language; by acquiring a foreign language they are developing the skill to do in a foreign language what they are already able to do in their first language. On this view, whereas the acquisition of first language proceeds in a more natural, organic way, foreign language learning requires more cognitive application and technical expertise. This then is a summary of a particular view of language learning which, even if not overtly stated, has underpinned much thinking and writing about the subject. This is understandable because this general characterisation of language learning does contain some elements of truth, making it difficult to see the fundamental flaws that now need to be identified.

Even if the account of first and foreign language acquisition presented here is accepted (and it will be argued that it should not be accepted in its entirety), it is a mistake to see language as subject as being equivalent to first language acquisition. This point has been emphasised in many of the Language in and for Education documents<sup>5</sup>. In some countries this kind of mistake is much less likely because of the prevalence of more than one official language. But in England for example much of the writing on the teaching of English up to the 1990s made the tacit assumption that the teaching of language as subject (in this case English) was equivalent to teaching the mother tongue. However, in a more international and globalised world with more immigration, more travel and more fluid national boundaries, language as subject is for a large number of learners not their first language, and overlaps with the teaching of a language such as Punjabi in England which for some learners is their mother tongue at least in their early, pre-school years. This has clear pedagogic implications for teachers who need to be sensitive to the diversity they are likely to find in the classroom. It also has implications for school policy in deciding how learners for whom the main language of schooling is not their first language will be supported.

A second problem with the traditional view is that the conception of the aims of first and foreign language learning embodies a very reductive view of the purpose and value of foreign language learning. It is a mistake to view foreign language learning in purely functional terms as being only about the acquisition of narrowly defined knowledge and skills. For example the development of identity through intercultural understanding is also a significant element.<sup>6</sup> In order to recognise the commonality in aims, the development of intercultural competence needs to be seen as a deeply moral concern and central to personal growth and development, rather than simply a process of getting to know something about another country at a superficial level. It also needs to be seen as intrinsically related to language learning and not simply an additional aspect of the subject curriculum. Key aspects such as openness, ability to de-centre, willingness to engage with others are more akin to deep-seated attributes and personal characteristics and take further the more surface notion of ‘becoming familiar with a foreign culture’. It is not the intention of this paper to review the research and literature on foreign language learning and bilingualism

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<sup>5</sup> See for example Language As Subject [http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/Default\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/Default_en.asp)

<sup>6</sup> There is some evidence of a fear that this in fact could go too far for some people and undermine the mother tongue identification when English is the foreign language.

but suffice it to say that there are other benefits of foreign language learning that also go beyond simply giving children a tool for communicating through a different language. They include, for example, enhanced awareness of and improved competence in their first language, increased potential for enriching cultural experiences, development of cognitive processes, increased self confidence and self awareness. Thus the aims of language as subject and foreign language learning are aligned more closely and in particular ways more than is sometimes thought.

It is perhaps worth pointing out that the aims of language teaching (both first and foreign language learning) which are related to what has been termed for convenience 'personal growth' are relevant to all levels of language learning and not just confined to higher levels of achievement. Of course when an individual's competence has developed sufficiently to allow fluent reading of literature this provides an important gateway to further understanding and contemplation of human characters, situations and moral dilemmas. However this development is a difference in degree rather than kind because even at basic levels of language learning pupils will be engaged in social interaction and the negotiation and construction of meaning that contributes, even if often in fairly minor ways, to the construction of identity.

A third difficulty with the 'traditional' view of aims described above is that the phrase 'first language acquisition' can lead to the mistaken assumption that something homogeneous, clear and easily identified is being referred to. On the contrary, as pointed out in the paper *Plurilingual and Intercultural Education as a Right*, all languages can be described as plural.<sup>7</sup> There is much language variety within a specific language. One aspect of learning a language is understanding that one's own local dialect may not be easily understood in other parts of the country by speakers of the same language particularly if combined with a strong accent. Language changes over time and speakers of a specific language may vary in their ability to understand the language of previous generations and vice versa. Different language genres demand mastery of different language forms. Learners may be competent in some aspects of spoken language but not in others or they may be less competent with written forms. Thus the linear sequence of (i) 'learning a first language' and (ii) 'picking up a foreign language as another useful tool' that is implied in the traditional view is limited in the picture of language learning it presents.

A fourth problem with the traditional view of language aims presented, and closely associated with the homogenous or unified view, is the implication that the first language is acquired naturally. There is a degree to which this statement is true. Most children acquire language spontaneously without explicit instruction or conscious effort. They use complex grammar without explicit knowledge of the structures they are using. However the view that language is acquired naturally is potentially highly misleading if interpreted too generally. For example, it applies less to reading and writing and more to spoken language. Moreover, even in the case of spoken language, it may only apply to conversational and less to formal types of language which may need to be explicitly taught. Of particular significance is that the academic language of school subjects is not acquired naturally and for some pupils developing this kind of competence is almost like learning a foreign language. Recognition of this fact can easily be obscured by the fact that academic language appears to be acquired naturally by some pupils often because of their privileged linguistic backgrounds. However many learners are at a disadvantage in that respect.

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<sup>7</sup> *Plurilingual and Intercultural Education as a Right* [http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/Default\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/Default_en.asp)

The fifth shortcoming of the traditional view relates to the implicit conception of language and meaning embodied in the way the nature of language learning is conceptualised. In this view language is mistakenly thought to derive its meaning purely through representation, by virtue of its relationship to reality – a so-called ‘picture’ theory of language. Language is seen predominantly as a system of signs whose forms and structures combine to create meaning in a transparent way. The implicit view of language and meaning here is ‘naming’ as embodied in the flash card approach to teaching foreign language whereby a linguistic sign attaches to a picture which in turn represents an object in reality. The point here is not to question the pedagogic practice but to suggest that the implicit view of meaning as ‘attaching labels’ can easily insinuate itself into a general view of language and meaning and is embedded in the conception of language as simply an arbitrary tool for getting things done. However, it has been an important insight underlying much philosophy, literary theory and poststructuralist thinking of the twentieth century that it is wrong to conceive of language in this way because it ignores the significance of social and cultural contexts where meaning is negotiated in use. If language is seen as a form of calculus, a system that is contained by clearly defined rules, that derives meaning primarily through its correspondence with the world then certain consequences follow. It is tempting to say that all languages reflect an identical reality and the particular choice of language is less important, reinforcing the conception of language as an arbitrary tool. On the other hand, the more accurate view, that emphasises language as an activity that does have rules but is not wholly determined by them, places more emphasis on the importance of the particular language situation and by extension the particular language. It is a view that recognises that meaning is created in social and cultural contexts and not just through a mechanical application of forms and structures.

This view of language that embraces ambiguity, uncertainty, texture and nuances of meaning as being central to language use and not just confined to creative and aesthetic uses of language in literature and poetry can sensitise the language user to the way language can deceive. For example, in the earlier discussion in this paper the view of first language as being something unified and homogenous was questioned. Arguably, it is the use of language itself that may deceive, for it is the very phrase ‘first language’ that can distract from recognition of plurality because the term itself implies one, discrete entity. Concepts of ‘first’ and ‘foreign’ language acquisition do serve a useful purpose but it is necessary to guard against mistaken assumptions implicit in the use of the terms.

### **Minority and migration languages**

This paper has argued that the aims of language as subject and foreign language learning have more in common than is generally acknowledged in the traditional view. Both have aims that go beyond narrow concepts of communication but see language development as being inextricably tied with personal and moral growth. Both have the potential to contribute to the development of plurilingualism and interculturalism as educational aims. Recognising these common aims however is not to deny the importance of first language or ‘mother tongue’. It has already been pointed out that language as subject should not be seen as equivalent to first language learning but it is also important to recognise the importance of the first language when determining educational policy. The traditional view which implicitly sees language as just a disembodied tool can easily lead to the conclusion that pupils for whom the language of schooling is not their first language are best served by prioritising the predominant language at the expense of the first language. However the view of aims that embraces the richer role of language in relation to personal growth, identity and making sense of the world is more ready to acknowledge the special significance of the first language.

The Language in and for Education paper *Regional, Minority and Migration Languages* recognizes the complexity facing policy developers when seeking to balance the need to promote national and international languages with a concern to preserve the teaching and learning of minority languages.<sup>8</sup> There are also practical resource issues which need to be taken into account when determining policy. Notwithstanding these significant challenges, the paper also draws attention to a unique Council of Europe convention – the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages - which adopts a pro-active approach to the protection and promotion of these languages. There are compelling reasons for adopting such a policy in education related to the rights of learners and communities, the support for identity formation and the preservation of culture, enriching the school context<sup>9</sup>. However there are also arguments derived from a more integrated conception of language aims. On this view, providing support for minority languages is more likely to reinforce rather than distract from learning other languages. A survey of the research literature is beyond the scope of this short paper, but there is evidence that when children develop their competence in two or more languages, they become more generally proficient in the effective use of language and in their language awareness. Such empirical evidence provides further support for an integrated conception of aims.

### **Language in other subjects**

The importance of language in other subjects is central to the Language in and for Education project and recognises that language education is not confined to language as subject and foreign language education but extends across all subjects. The paper *Language in Other Subjects* shows that language competence is an integral part of subject competence not an additional external element, and highlights in some detail the linguistic demands of learning a subject and the need for pupils to acquire academic, often subject specific discourse genres.<sup>10</sup> It may be helpful to relate the concept of language in other subjects to the different views of aims presented earlier. The traditional view sees language as subject as a service provider to other subjects. On this basis the learner acquires the necessary language competence in language as subject and then uses that competence to learn other subjects. The difficulty with this view is not that it is wrong in its entirety because there is an element of transfer from learning in one situation to another but more that it is not the whole story. Once again, on this view language is viewed as a disembodied tool that can easily be summoned to do a specific job, with insufficient recognition of the importance of context and use. In contrast, learning a subject is inextricably tied to language learning within that subject, whether this be specific concepts or types of language use. For example, understanding science involves learning to use the language of science and learning citizenship involves also learning the language of citizenship and participation. Acquiring the language of the subject is for many pupils more akin to acquiring a foreign language than simply applying the linguistic competence that they have learned elsewhere.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has outlined two broadly different approaches to describing the aims of language learning in schools. The traditional approach places emphasis on a discrete approach to describing aims. On this view language as subject is concerned with developing language

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<sup>8</sup> *Regional, Minority and Migration Languages* [http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/Default\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/Default_en.asp)

<sup>9</sup> See the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities

<sup>10</sup> *Language in Other Subjects* [http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/Default\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/Default_en.asp)

competence in reading, writing, speaking and listening. Recognition is also given to personal growth goals, often associated with the more creative and aesthetic aspects of the subject. The aims of foreign language learning are conceived fairly straightforwardly as acquiring the ability to communicate in other languages. The subject curriculum is seen as having the responsibility for developing subject specific knowledge, skills and understanding using language competence as a tool that has been developed in language as subject. The alternative view which is central to the Language in and for Education project recognises the overarching aims of plurilingualism and interculturalism which are relevant to all aspects of the curriculum and which are in turn associated with education for active responsible participatory citizenship, democratic participation and personal growth. To see these aims as being inextricably tied with language learning requires a more nuanced view of language and meaning than embodied in the traditional view of language aims.

What then are the practical implications for schools? A key issue is the importance of dialogue and mutual understanding in order to promote awareness of how the different elements of the curriculum integrate with regard to language learning. A useful focus for the development of this kind of dialogue is the development of a whole school policy on language. One aspect of such a policy might be to examine in detail the shared goals of language learning and the particular responsibilities of aspects of the curriculum. As outlined in the paper *Reflections on the Use of Descriptors in Learning, Teaching and Assessment* descriptors for language teaching are by no means straightforward but they have the potential to provide a useful focus to articulate the aspects of language learning that are common and specific to particular subject contexts.<sup>11</sup> The Language in and for Education project is in the process of developing instruments to support such goals.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Reflections on the Use of Descriptors in Learning, Teaching and Assessment.

[http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/Default\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/Default_en.asp)

<sup>12</sup> Beacco, J. *Items for a description of linguistic competence in the language of schooling necessary for teaching/learning history (at the end of obligatory education)*; Vollmer, H. *Items for a description of linguistic competence in the language of schooling necessary for teaching/learning science (at the end of obligatory education)* [http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/Default\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/Default_en.asp)