

Languages in Education  
Languages for Education



Language Policy Division

Plurilingual and intercultural education  
as a right

This text has been produced for the *Platform of resources and references for plurilingual and intercultural education* by

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## Plurilingual and intercultural education as a right

This text locates plurilingual and intercultural education within a rationale concerning the right to education. This involves a change of perspective insofar as schooling is here conceived as having in particular to allow all those engaged in it to exercise the rights to education they possess. Language education, defined here as plurilingual and intercultural, thus becomes that element of the process of education which puts languages in the service of a quality education and in relationship with the general aims of the school and the rights of learners.

The text first emphasises the transversal nature of language education, taking into account the linguistic repertoire of learners and the languages present in the school (language of schooling, and other languages whether taught or not) and their relationship to social uses outside school. It then addresses the relationship between the rights of learners and the different forms of language activity in the school.

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. The right to language education as a change of perspective

For the Council of Europe, the right to language education, in the form of plurilingual and intercultural education, should be seen as both an integral part and a major component of quality education. This plurilingual and intercultural education can be defined (see document *Plurilingual and intercultural education as project*) in terms of:

- the rights of the pupil
- the learning experiences that facilitate the exercise of these rights
- the relationships between these rights and the social expectations inherent in the education system.

There are several important reference documents and statements of principle on language rights, including UNESCO recommendations, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights, the "Group of Intellectuals" proposals (European Union), OECD documentation and recommendations, and recommendations on the education of migrants and of Roma children. Similarly the main aims of education systems are well known, namely:

- success and achievement for all pupils, being a contribution to establishing equal opportunities
- acquisition of appropriate skills, knowledge, dispositions and attitudes
- cultural transmission and the establishment of individual and collective identities
- preparation for democratic citizenship
- establishment of a knowledge-based society
- social inclusion and cohesion

But they are not yet explicit components of school syllabuses and activities, because they are difficult to combine or place in some balance or order of priority, depending on context. Emphasising one or other aim according to circumstance, may not be sufficient to ensure that they form a balanced and efficient whole.

If the notion of education as a body of individual or collective rights is to be taken seriously, it implies a major change of perspective, since successive stages of school must then be seen in terms of enabling those concerned to exercise their rights to education.

Nevertheless, education systems also fulfil functions and respond to aims that cannot be confined to the educational entitlements of those concerned. They have to take account of societal expectations, scientific, technical and economic developments and collective interests, both national and other, that affect education in various ways and serve to modify, guide or even restrict the exercise of a universal right to quality education. This is not to imply that there is some inevitable tension between such rights and the social role of education. In democratic societies that respect human rights, it is more a question of securing their convergence. However, this change of viewpoint is important.

Adopting a "users" rights perspective to education systems does not of course mean that relationships within and around schools have to be placed in a judicial context, or entail the adoption of a consumerist approach. What is important is that the universal right to quality education should be an explicit element of any education system, in both theory and practice.

Currently, many European countries' social objectives for education are concerned not just with values but also with notions such as "shared culture", "common core competences" and

"key competences". Education systems are accountable for their performance and are evaluated on the basis of various indicators. "Standards" are now current practice. How they are standardised, the extent to which they are binding and whether they are generally applicable or only in specific contexts vary, and are the subject of often lively debate. Any discussion of rights has now to be seen in the light of such developments.

It is not necessary to dwell here on the obvious fact that, in a democratic society, individuals' rights go hand in hand with recognition of the rights of others. I may not exercise my right to express my views in a way that deprives others of this same right. Reciprocity of rights and their exercise also entails a duty of responsibility and commitment. Asserting my right to quality education is only meaningful if I consider it my duty to make optimum use of the means I am given to exercise this right. This applies to language education equally.

## **1.2. The transversality of language education**

Language and languages play a key role in all forms of education, schooling and subject teaching. They involve more than just a command of linguistic means of communication. Language is a tool for acquiring knowledge, one aspect of the development of the person, as both individual and social actor, a means of and factor in understanding and making sense of reality, and a vehicle for imaginative creativity. Language education is therefore a fundamental transversal element of schooling, and is not confined to those points in the timetable when languages are taught as subjects.

Even though the official language or languages of schooling<sup>1</sup> is/are a major element of language education, in a language rights perspective, all the languages and language varieties in a school have to be taken into account. These include:

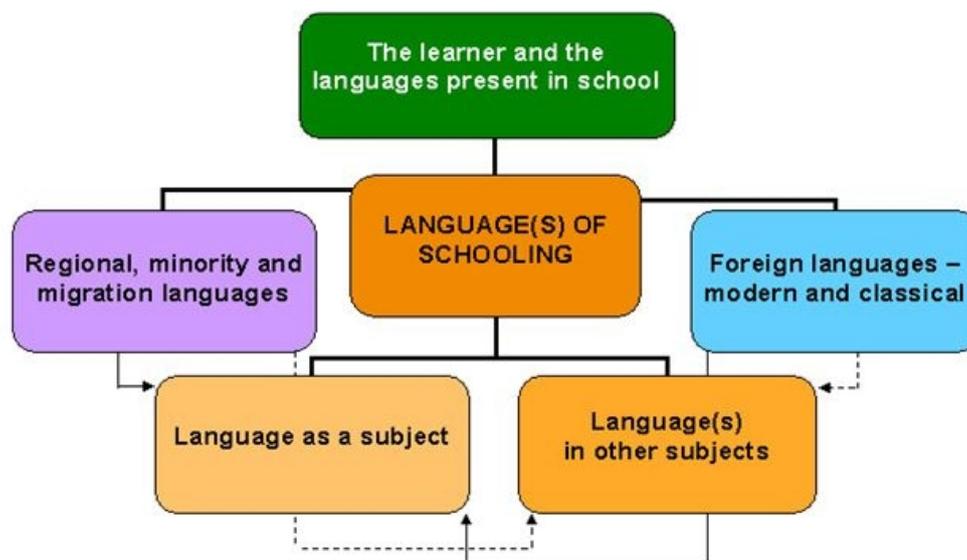
- each pupil's own, evolving language repertoire,
- the official main language, as both a subject in its own right and the language of instruction for other subjects,
- minority, regional and immigrant languages, as parts of certain pupils' (sometimes unacknowledged) repertoires and/or parts of the school syllabus, as either subjects taught or indeed languages of instruction for other subjects,
- foreign languages, as subjects taught and/or medium for certain other forms of instruction (and even as part of the main repertoire of some of the pupils in the school); classical languages, as subjects taught.

This complex whole, whose components vary according to context, constitutes what might be termed the "languages of education", understood to mean languages in education and languages for education. Language education, which is necessarily plurilingual and intercultural, is therefore that component of education which, having regard to the stated aims of education generally and the rights of learners, puts languages at the service of quality education. [See the study on *Multicultural Societies, Pluricultural People and the Project of Intercultural Education*]

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<sup>1</sup> We are aware that certain countries' or regions' education systems have several official languages with equal status. For convenience, in the remainder of this document the singular will mainly be used, but we must not ignore these rarer, but more complex, situations that exist in Europe.

## LANGUAGES IN EDUCATION, LANGUAGES FOR EDUCATION



In the diagram above, the following definitions apply:

- "the learner and the languages present in school": all languages and language varieties, whether recognised in some form in the curriculum or simply part of pupils' language repertoires, that may be heard in school, for example in the playground. It is argued that all these languages and varieties are languages of education in the sense that they all contribute or potentially contribute – whether learners already know or are learning them, or are simply exposed to them – to their school experience of linguistic plurality and to the construction of their knowledge and experiences of learning
- "language or languages of schooling": the language or – more rarely – languages, particularly the national one or ones, serving as the normal, common and assumed shared basis for school functioning. It appears as both a subject that is taught and a medium of instruction for other subjects.
- "regional, minority and migration languages and varieties": languages and varieties recognised in the school either as subjects that are taught or as medium of instruction for other subjects. These may be regional languages, ones spoken by minorities, or the family languages of children from migrant backgrounds<sup>2</sup>.
- "foreign languages (modern or classical)": other languages featuring as curriculum subjects. In the case of modern languages, they may form part of bilingual education, and thus contribute to the teaching of other subjects<sup>3</sup>.

Taking particular account of learners' rights also implies that the development of their language repertoires, competences and awareness is critical for their language education. This development is reflected in a growing capacity to understand and use linguistic forms

<sup>2</sup> This covers a very diverse range of situations. For example, a regional language may be a subject that is taught, a recognised focus for discussion and comparison in the teaching of another language or the main medium of instruction, as in total or partial immersion schools. In several European countries, regional or minority languages have an official status that makes them, by law, official languages of schooling.

<sup>3</sup> Once again, this covers various situations. Thus the "foreign" language may be the first language of some of the school's pupils.

and textual genres, command of which is essential if they are to succeed at school and become responsible members of society.

With respect to learners' development, it is therefore important to locate questions concerning plurilingual and intercultural education within a definition of various linguistic spaces which they either bring to or encounter in the school and for which school prepares or accustoms them. The designation of 'linguistic space' refers here to domains of language use which are in contact and intersection with each other within the school. There are five different ones: the linguistic repertoire of the learner, the language of schooling as a school subject, the language of schooling as a vehicle for access to other school subjects, other languages (taught and/or acknowledged as present in the school), social uses of language outside school. The first four are to be found in the above diagram. The last one refers to the global context of the school.

- The first of these spaces is the one which comprises the linguistic repertoire of the learner. It is this repertoire – already plural and even plurilingual – which will throughout the process of schooling be in contact with varieties of the language of schooling and the languages taught, and which will be enriched, restructured and made more complex as a consequence.
- The second space corresponds to the language of schooling as a subject of teaching which, in the actual practice of the classroom, is in fact less homogeneous and 'singular' than is symbolically represented
- The third space is also diverse in its genres and norms and includes the uses of the language of schooling in other curriculum subjects; the difficulties many learners have in these other subjects can often be attributed in part at least to the linguistic dimensions of the subjects and the way they function.
- The fourth space is that of the foreign language or languages and other (regional, minority or migration) languages taught or in some way acknowledged in the school and which may also be present or accessible in the environment.
- The fifth and final space is that of social genres, of discursive practices, of text modes present in the environment (media, civil life, etc); the school prepares learners to participate in active and responsible ways with these both through the language of schooling and other languages taught and through the disciplinary competences and cultures it provides.

**The major question of the overall economy of a plurilingual education – if this analysis is accepted – lies in deciding how and to what point these five spaces partially overlap with each other within the school framework, and how they are in balance with each other.** It is self-evident, whether explicit or not, whether made conscious or not as a result of reflection on methodology and pedagogical practices, that overlapping and transfer must exist between language as subject and language as a vehicle of teaching, between these two spaces on the one hand and social uses on the other, and between foreign languages, other disciplines and social uses.

**However, from the perspective of the right to a language education, it is the first space mentioned, the repertoire of the learner, which is the most important. The major purpose, especially if the curriculum is defined as the experiential learning trajectory that the individual follows, is to ensure that the repertoire of the learners is extended – in the framework of general educational purposes – to a growing mastery of discourses, genres and texts which are present in the other defined spaces.**

It is in relation to this development of the learner's linguistic repertoire that various questions can be formulated and one can in particular examine the close complementarity of:

- (a) rights to language education in the context of the gradual extension of pupils' repertoires and competences into the different sectors presented above (languages of schooling and other languages as school subjects, languages as a medium of instruction across the curriculum for developing subject knowledge and skills, social uses of languages and language varieties);
- (b) types of experience which, according to the stage of education reached, are likely to contribute to a plurilingual and intercultural language education process;
- (c) specific measures focused on particular groups of pupils, particularly migrant children and young persons and pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds;
- (d) certain conclusions, particularly concerning assessment in the field of plurilingual and intercultural education.

In this present document only point (a) is addressed and developed in the following. Points (b), (c) and (d) will be dealt with in the text entitled "*Rights, learning experiences and school populations*" (currently being finalised) which is a direct extension of this one.

## **2. SECTORS OF LANGUAGE ACTIVITY AND THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION**

### **2.1. General language rights**

The "general rights" referred to here are the language aspects of their schooling to which all pupils are entitled, irrespective of the sector of language activity concerned. They are general language rights in that the school as a whole, rather than individual subjects, is responsible for ensuring that they are respected. The emphasis here is on the language aspects, but particular attention must also be paid to the cultural origins, practices and representations of pupils and their environment, in accordance with the values and principles of an approach to education that is concerned with human rights, equality of opportunity, inclusion and social cohesion.

These rights may concern:

- acknowledgement of, due regard for and recognition of pupils' pre-school and out-of-school language repertoires;
- familiarisation with language behaviour and rules and textual genres that form part of the school's everyday functioning;
- exposure to a variety of forms of communication and text genres that enable pupils to discover different means of learning and means of access to knowledge;
- making it clear to pupils what is required of them in terms of language skills if they are to continue expanding their knowledge and meeting the expectations of the education system;
- regular assessment of their progress or difficulties in different areas of school language activity;
- support and guidance from qualified teachers who are aware of the importance and multiple functions of language and languages, in both their own field and the general sphere of education, and are able to exploit this fully in their professional practice;
- teaching that places considerable stress on the heuristic role of language and languages, as instruments not just of personal expression, communication and interaction and of retaining and transmitting knowledge, but also of research and discovery.

These general language rights of pupils also imply that:

- they are given the means to improve their language skills in order to meet the school's expectations, both in its ordinary functioning and in the establishment of knowledge;
- the content and form of their development in the language of schooling should contribute to their academic, cultural, occupational and civic integration into and participation in society;
- to that end, the school should take an active part in developing pupils' literacy in a broad and extensive manner, via a range of written forms and genres which are critical to their schooling and the command of which it encourages, but also by establishing highly developed oral discourse skills, which are also important for their schooling and their social development, but which schools often do little to foster.

## 2.2. Rights concerning language as subject

This body of rights is more particularly concerned with language as subject, but in certain areas but also specifies general rights in some areas. It concerns:

- the development of language competences, for and by activities involving written and oral comprehension, oral and written expression, and mediation, in their communicational and cognitive aspects and as means of personal expression and social interaction;
- the acquisition of the necessary means to conduct typical communication in school and social life, especially in situations of official, formal communication where the stakes are high ;
- an awareness of the complexity, variability and potential of languages, both in comparison with each other and in their internal diversity;
- practical familiarity with the rules and standards governing languages' phonological, morphological, orthographical, syntactical and sociolinguistic functioning;
- familiarity with and preparation for creative, ludic and aesthetic uses of languages;
- the study, practice and critical analysis of text genres and how they function linguistically and semiotically, including both more specifically education-related genres and those to be found in the wider social environment, particularly the media;
- access to the literary and more general cultural heritage as transmitted by language, and to intercultural openness and understanding via languages and linguistic products.

[See the text on '[Language as a subject](#)']

## 2.3. Rights concerning language as a medium of instruction for other subjects

In the teaching and study of other – sometimes erroneously termed non-linguistic – subjects, and particularly when the main majority language is the primary means of communication and cognitive development, the specifically linguistic nature of the work on and in the subject is often downgraded, or even ignored. Hence the importance of an appreciation of this factor and an acknowledgement of what the pupils (and often the teachers of these subjects) are **entitled** to, namely:

- understanding of the linguistic and semiotic dimensions of any subject and of all subject teaching;
- understanding of the relationships between the common language and specific languages;

- understanding of each subject's specific text genres and communication schemata and the language characteristics of the operations - often transversal – applied to these subjects, such as observation, argumentation, explanation, exemplification, experiment, reasoning, specific forms of rhetoric and demonstration.
- active and reflective familiarity with these genres, schemata and operations, in terms of both their specifically subject-related aspects and possible transversal elements.

[For further information see the text on « [Language in other subjects](#) »]

#### **2.4. Rights concerning relations between school subjects and between subjects and pupils**

School subjects are clearly distinguished and often compartmentalised, for reasons that may be epistemological, but are also linked to educational cultures and traditions. Without necessarily challenging these divisions, it is reasonable to argue that the contacts, relationships, areas of convergence and differences between the various fields of knowledge should be made explicit, whenever this could contribute to the coherent construction of knowledge and the development of pupil competences, and whenever this would help to establish the link with pupils' own views and preconceptions and with the societies in which they live. This gives pupils the rights to have:

- their spontaneous and "naïve" representations and views verbalised and taken into account;
- the links between subjects – both languages and other subjects – made explicit and their transversal elements and similarities and differences exploited, with a view to enhanced efficiency regarding language, cognitive processes and the curriculum;
- the relevance of these school subjects to social practices and genres outside the school clearly explained.

Naturally, this inventory of rights (2.1 to 2.4) has to be seen in the context of society's expectations of education systems (see 1.1). Language education policies are above all concerned with how to establish the link between the universal right to quality education and the collective social goals assigned to schools. But what is important is to ensure that these goals, whether they be in terms of target profiles, common core competences or performance standards, are also linked to individual pupils' rights to a language education that will assist them in their school careers and well beyond. It is in this perspective that the document “*Rights, learning experiences and school populations*” (currently being finalised) has to be seen as closely complementary to the present text.