Languages in Education
Languages for Education

Language Policy Division

Language(s) of Schooling

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This text provides an explanation of the term 'language(s) of schooling' and a description of two of its key components 'language as subject' and 'language in other subjects'. It stresses the importance of recognising the wide range of language uses a pupil will encounter in school and the need to build on the pupils' individual language repertoire. This text provides an introduction to the 'language as subject' and languages in other subjects' sections of the platform.

Introduction

The broad conception of what teaching language entails in part depends on how language itself is conceptualised. Language can be described as a system of signs, and can be studied as an object in itself focusing on its specific grammatical categories. This is an important process, especially when it helps the learner to recognise how various languages express different meanings through subtle grammatical differences. However, language is not only an object of scientific study; language is closely connected to our subjectivity and helps us define and understand the world. We think with language, and language enhances the development of thinking. Language is also clearly a key means of communicating with other people and with the texts we read. Thus language is a prerequisite for personal development and learning as well as for learning in the context of formal education and professional work. Knowledge is exchanged in and through language in all subjects in school. Pupils and teachers talk, read, and write within the learning processes and pupils need to master language to demonstrate their knowledge in most school subjects. In all domains of society knowledge of language and knowledge of the world are closely connected. It is this central role of language which is acknowledged by the European Commission when identifying communication in mother-tongue and foreign languages as key competences essential for lifelong learning.[1] The educational system plays a major role in providing language competences for all pupils and thus providing equal opportunities for all. A broad approach to language is therefore needed, as embodied in the concept of 'Languages in Education - Languages for Education'.

This concept is not just a structural device to identify the different areas of the curriculum concerned with the development of language (although the term *does* function usefully in that way) but it also represents a commitment to particular values. The plural word 'languages' recognises a fundamental commitment to the concept of plurality as a significant part of the theoretical underpinning which drives the vision. Education systems must be able to handle the different types of plurality which reflect those that exist in the wider society, ranging from a diversity of languages, cultures and social groups to different values and priorities. This presents a particular challenge to schools which must try to ensure that all pupils, whatever their circumstances or background, achieve success. Language plays a crucial role in ensuring cultural diversity, democratic citizenship and social inclusion, and the development of competence in the language(s) of schooling is essential to ensuring the right to education all

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[1] Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning.

through equal access to the curriculum. The development of a coherent and theoretically sound policy on language development in all its forms is essential for all education systems.

The inter-relationship between the different aspects of language activity needs to be recognised. A pupil will enter school with one or more specific language but will also have an individual repertoire of language uses and will be engaged in language uses in broad social contexts which overlap with the uses in school. That repertoire will be extended not just in language as subject and the foreign language classroom but also in all other subjects that make increasing demands on language use as the pupil progresses through school.

Tensions and complexities

Recognising that the world of education today is a field of tensions and complexities means that convergent and divergent tendencies need to be balanced in coherent and transparent policies, and complex goals need to be met by educators and students. A number of these tensions and dilemmas are addressed in this section, first in more general terms and then with a more specific focus on language as subject.

Humanistic values as well as a more utilitarian or pragmatic vision bring powerful, sometimes competing, arguments to shape education policy. A curriculum for language as subject can however benefit from both perspectives. A common issue of debate in many countries is concerned with finding a balance between national traditions in education and European or international tendencies. Policy makers are aware that isolation is not an appropriate stance, and consequently steps have been taken toward common general aims and standards, embracing new practices and approaches in the field. This has taken place with regard to lifelong learning and professional qualifications recognised through the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning[2] that offers descriptions of qualifications along the lines of "knowledge", "skills" and "competence". Another example of the development of common aims and standards is found in the *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR) for modern foreign languages.

A major challenge is how to give a coherent and holistic perspective to teaching and learning in light of the fact that knowledge is continuously expanding and changing. It is generally recognised that an atomized perspective on knowledge is no longer appropriate, but the challenge remains of reaching a common understanding about the key domains of knowledge in school. It is not easy, for example, to decide how to address an integrated domain such as 'sciences', because a strong tradition in education is to approach each subject (chemistry, physics, biology etc.) separately. There are parallels with language as subject where a range of goals and learning processes need to be balanced and integrated to form a coherent experience for the learners.

These then are some of the sources of key general tensions in education: balancing humanitarian versus utilitarian values, responding to increasing internationalisation, creating a coherent and integrated curriculum in the light of constantly expanding knowledge. These issues give rise to some key questions: how should the foundation of education be conceived in the modern world; how can we describe a concept like 'general culture'? how can education offer students relevant learning opportunities both for personal development and for becoming responsible participants in society? Three dimensions which describe the complexities of the languages of education perspective are relevant:

- *forms of* plurality: multiple forms of knowledge, multiple resources for acquiring/constructing knowledge, multiple languages and other semiotic systems in

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[2] The European Qualifications Framework. Adopted 23/4/2008.

which knowledge and other forms of information, expression and communication are built, multiple populations, multiple identities between individuals and communities, within individuals, multiple views on systems and cultures of education, multiple economic systems, multiple principles for action and values,

- *globalization and unifying tendencies*: the standardizing effects of the globalization processes, national unification for reaching a common identity, and a process of European co-ordination against a background of harmonization or standardization*,*

- *the knowledge society*: characterized by the principle of lifelong learning and by the relationship between knowledge and competences leading to learning to learn, for lifelong learning or developing awareness, understanding and critical mastery of the many available resources*.*

All these trigger new expectations for integrated, trans- cross- and pluridisciplinary approaches, in order to build complex harmonious learners, able to consciously participate in the process of their own development and in society.

The *languages of education* perspective encourages an integrated approach to language/languages in the school context. This implies finding links between language-oriented subjects and other subjects that use language as a means of teaching and learning a certain field of knowledge (science, social sciences, arts etc.). This integrated approach aims at developing the students' linguistic and communicative competences in a more coherent and efficient way in order to be successful in their personal, social and professional life.

The term 'language(s) of schooling' embraces two key components 'language as subject' and 'language in other subjects'. There are cases, of course, where several different languages comprise the 'languages of schooling' when for example there are two or more official languages or in contexts where a minority language and a state language are simultaneously or successively languages of schooling, i.e. both languages as subject and languages in other subjects. However in all cases, whether there is one or more officially recognised language, language as subject and language in other subjects have a key contribution to achieving the goal of plurilingual and intercultural education and in ensuring the learners' right to a quality education.

Every subject has its dilemmas, its tensions and dichotomies, its complexities that need to be dealt with in constructing a curriculum and in applying the curriculum in schools. Within language as subject these can be examined in relation to aims, contents, approaches, and students' diversity.

Language education does not stop with language as subject. Language proficiency is equally needed in all other subjects, which are sometimes falsely considered as "non-linguistic" subjects. Communication requirements such as reading and understanding expository texts, listening to explanations, answering questions orally and presenting study results are present in other subjects in close relationship with substantial content. It is often wrongly assumed that the respective competences and skills are developing by themselves, without needing particular attention in the subject classroom, or without specific (re-)training based on what has already been developed within language as subject. This language dimension in teaching and learning other subjects is the second pillar of the language of schooling.

A traditional conception of the relationship between language as subject and other subjects like history, geography and science was to view the role of language as subject as 'servicing' the needs of other subjects. In other words pupils learned language use in one context and applied it in another. There is still some truth in this formulation because language as subject still has special role to play in language development. However the relationship, described in

this way, does not sufficiently recognise the contextual nature of language learning nor the links between language development and cognitive growth. Language as subject and language in other subjects are both addressed in separate sections of the platform but the need to consider the relationship between these dimensions in order to foster an integrated approach to language development is addressed in both.