

Languages in Education
Languages for Education



Language Policy Division

Regional, minority and migration languages

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Regional, minority and migration languages

This text provides a brief introduction to the part of the Platform that deals with the languages of minorities and of migrants in education systems. The term *regional or minority languages* is used to refer to indigenous languages traditionally used by a minority group over a long period within a country, to non-territorial languages (e.g. Romani) and sign languages. *Migrant languages* is used to refer to the mother tongues of migrant children, in which they may have varying degrees of proficiency depending on the extent of use and support for these languages.

1. Minority languages

Education authorities have to deal with competing goals of language policy. The complex interaction among the goals of economic competitiveness, social inclusion and integration, and human rights has to be addressed in making decisions about language education policy, including those affecting the relationship between national languages and minority languages. This is a sensitive issue because of the particular role of state languages in ensuring national cohesion and integration and the strongly symbolic significance of languages as a marker of identity and membership of a community. The role of national and international languages tends to be emphasised where the demands of the market dominate decision-making, which may impact on the human rights dimension and the learning and teaching of minority languages. This can be seen in a tendency in some contexts to accord more significance to learning a widely used foreign/international language, or a high status neighbouring language, than the indigenous minority or regional languages.

While the necessity to develop proficiency in the state language is based on social and political concerns, it cannot be assumed that children whose home language is different to that of the school will quickly catch up in the academic subjects with their peers who speak the majority language as their first language. There is ample evidence that equal access to the full curriculum and the development of the specific kinds of ‘academic’ competences needed to learn successfully in different subjects or domains requires time and forms of explicit support, in particular (but not only) for those for whom the language of schooling is a second language. At the same time there is a risk that the learner’s progress in school may suffer if competences in the first language are not adequately developed in the first instance, resulting in a ‘subtractive’ approach to plurilingual education.

The challenge for education policy deciders is to find a context appropriate form of plurilingual and intercultural education based on supporting and developing the learner’s plurilingual repertoire. This could include good quality bilingual education which ensures an ‘additive’ (as opposed to ‘subtractive’) approach to bilingualism, which in turn provides the learner with transferable skills and positive attitudes for the successful further development of his or her plurilingual profile in the manner to which he or she is entitled. For further reflection on learners entitlements, see the text on [*Plurilingual and intercultural education as a right*](#).

There is no unique model. The choice of languages on offer and the balance struck between teaching in/of the mother tongue of minorities and the official/national language(s) will vary

according to the situation of the languages concerned, the socio-political setting and the individual school context. Account needs to be taken also of factors such as the supply of well qualified teachers and suitable textbooks, and in certain contexts issues relating to codification and standardising the corpus may also arise. Many of these issues are dealt with in. *Bilingual education: some policy issues*.

The Council of Europe, in keeping with the fundamental values guiding its actions, adopts a rights-based approach to the teaching and learning of the mother tongue of minorities. Language rights are an integral part of human rights and specific measures may be required to ensure full and effective equality without discrimination in that respect. The Council has therefore developed specific legally binding conventions dealing both with the rights of national minorities and with the protection and promotion of minority and regional languages. These are complemented by numerous non-binding Recommendations and Resolutions dealing with a range of issues related to linguistic and cultural diversity.

The [Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities](#) adopts a non-discrimination approach and recognises the right of every person belonging to a national minority to learn his or her minority language. States that have ratified this instrument are obliged to endeavour to provide instruction in or of minority languages as far as possible and where there is sufficient demand from persons belonging to the relevant national minorities. Provision may take the form of 'opportunities for being taught the minority language or for receiving instruction in this language' (Article 14, paragraph 2).

The [European Charter for Regional or Minority languages](#) adopts a pro-active approach to the protection and promotion of these languages as an essential part of the shared cultural wealth of Europe, affirming the principle that the place accorded to regional or minority languages in education systems can play a crucial role in their maintenance and vitality. The language charter requires that these languages be present 'at all appropriate stages' of education (Article 7, paragraph 1.f). The convention is designed to accommodate in a flexible manner the significant differences that exist in the situation of regional or minority languages in Europe. Consequently, each state can choose between the different commitments possible so as to match the charter as closely as possible to the particular context of each language and with regard to each of the different levels of education: pre-school, primary, secondary, technical and vocational, university and adult education (Article 8).

Both conventions aim to promote the Council of Europe values of plurilingual and intercultural education, and stipulate that the learning of minority languages is without prejudice to the teaching and learning of the official language of the state. This important principle is recalled also by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in its [Recommendation](#) on the place of the mother tongue in school education (Recommendation 1740 (2006)). The Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation defines bilingualism – or plurilingualism – as an asset rather than a burden on pupils, and advocates bilingual education models based on the mother tongue (not only as a transition to mastery of the second language) as the basis for long-term success.

2. Migrant languages

The diversity of languages spoken by migrants, which is one aspect of the rich multilingual and multicultural nature of contemporary European societies, also presents a challenge to education systems in relation to teaching the official language and maintaining their mother tongues. Unlike indigenous minority languages, the languages of migrants, with some notable

exceptions, tend to be diverse and less concentrated in specific locations. Educational provision for maintaining these languages can vary considerably according to the geographical location, concentration and numbers of speakers of a language and the length of time that a language has been present in a country.

Policy developments have been a response in particular to mobility and the integration of migrant workers and their children, and consequently have tended to focus primarily on the acquisition of the language of the host country for integration, social inclusion and citizenship or nationality purposes. The Council of Europe has developed policy guidelines and tools to assist states in finding inclusive solutions to the language problems faced by adult migrants, who are an extremely heterogeneous group. Language training for migrants, as for all learners, forms part of a plurilingual and intercultural education, which includes education for intercultural dialogue and linguistic goodwill. In that spirit courses for adult migrants could be expected to encourage the [transmission of languages](#) between generations.

Schools may be motivated to support language maintenance for functional or humanistic reasons. The former include preparation for an eventual return home, providing a basis for improving the learning of the language of the host country, or retaining a potential economic trade asset. Humanistic reasons relate to identity and confidence building which in turn may be linked to school success, helping to bridge the gap between school and home, and enhancing intercultural understanding and dialogue. The languages of migrants have been described as ‘additional’ languages that are a valuable resource for Europe and an often unrecognised asset bringing cultural, intellectual, economic, and intercultural benefits. The ECML project entitled [Valuing all languages in Europe](#) offers further reflection on these issues.

Education systems have tended to concentrate on ensuring that children of migrant background can master the language of schooling for integration and social inclusion purposes, and the issues arising are well documented, e.g. in [PISA](#) related studies. At the same time, even as the language of the majority increases in importance for migrant communities over time, and while intergenerational language loss does occur, there is evidence of the increasing vitality of migrant languages, reinforced by ‘transmigration’ as a growing number of migrants tend to keep up their links to their country of origin, while actively integrating into their new community. Schools have a vital role to play in actively developing the plurilingual and pluricultural competences of migrant children, and it is argued by some researchers that the longer that children receive good quality instruction in their mother tongue, including the development of bi-literacy, the better they are likely to become in the majority language. This argument is developed in the following document: [Linguistic diversity and new minorities in Europe](#).

Support for maintaining migrant languages is found in a number of Council of Europe instruments. For example, states that have ratified the [European Social Charter \(revised\)](#) undertake not only to make provision for the teaching of the national language of the receiving state but also to promote and facilitate, as far as practicable, the teaching of the mother tongue to the children of the migrant worker (Article 19, paragraph 12). It is seen as important for the children to maintain their cultural and linguistic heritage, *inter alia*, in order to provide them with a possibility of reintegration if and when the migrant worker returns home.

A 2008 [Recommendation](#) on strengthening the integration of children of migrants and of immigrant background draws attention to the value of allowing migrant children to be able to undertake part of their studies in their mother tongue during the early stages of their school career as this will assist the children in developing the cognitive and academic skill necessary to successfully pursue their studies in the language of instruction.

The [Green Paper](#) '*Migration & mobility: challenges and opportunities for EU education systems*' of the European Commission (2008) describes efforts to promote learning of the heritage language, sometimes within the framework of bilateral agreements with other Member States. It shows how scope for such learning is increased by new opportunities for mobility, media and internet contact with the country of origin and *e-twinning* between schools of host and sending countries.