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# Aims in the Teaching/Learning of Language(s) of Education (LE)

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# Aims in the Teaching/Learning of Language(s) of Education (LE)

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## Abstract

All school subjects contribute to developing language competences and all subjects use language for learning and presenting knowledge. Language as a subject (LS) and foreign languages in school (FL) have specific aims for language-related skills and competences, for producing and understanding texts for communication as well as for aesthetic purposes. A broad approach to language education (LE) provides an opportunity to understand the importance of language competences for a variety of purposes: for learning, for personal development, for participation in society, for communication and interaction with others in a variety of social and intercultural settings. The aims of LE imply a broad definition of language competences.

The aims of LE can be understood in a practical and utilitarian sense as well as in terms of developing a basis for living a meaningful life in community with others. They can be seen as aims for the individual and as aims for society as a whole.

The aims of LE focus on specific challenges in school education which differ from language acquisition outside school, the main difference being cultural aims and aims for personal growth. Thus language acquisition cannot easily be separated from reasoning, critical thinking, interpretation of a variety of text forms, awareness of genre and context, awareness of poetic and aesthetic language.

The aims of LE include knowledge, skills, abilities to learn and existential competence. However, we need to discuss these concepts to examine our various understandings of what they mean and how they can be reached.

## 1. The Language(s) of Education

The Language(s) of Education (LE) is an overarching concept for language as a subject (LS), language across the curriculum (LAC) and foreign languages (FL). The aims of LE should be broadly described in terms of individual competences and of cultural competences required by society. The core purposes of LE teaching and learning in a social perspective are related to certain general aims of the Council of Europe: social cohesion, participatory democracy and respect for diversity within the member states. In this context language has an important role to play. It is a means of communication and personal development as well as a tool for learning and thinking, for artistic expression and for building identities. Mastering the LE is a prerequisite for being able to participate in society in all the different discourse communities a learner will meet. This includes a variety of skills and competences starting from the most basic reading and writing skills to being able to understand and reflect upon complicated texts and situations that will imply advanced linguistic and cultural competences. A definition of the competences covered by LE will therefore include *what the learner knows, what the learner can do and what the learner is able to understand, think about and reflect upon*. The aims for LE cover all of these.

### LE and the concept of plurilingualism

The aims of LE coincide to a great extent with the aims of education itself: learners should be able to participate in society according to their abilities, to be included in cultural forms that are considered valuable in society, to be able to learn and to develop these abilities in a lifelong perspective. They should be able to navigate in the domain of language with a varied repertoire of linguistic and social skills. This means that the aims of LE coincide with the notion of *plurilingualism* as described in the Council of Europe's *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning teaching, assessment (CEFR)*<sup>1</sup>. This document shows the importance of developing language competences not just in a specific language but generally, as a basis for communicating in many different languages and situations. This means being able not only to communicate in a diversity of languages, but also in a diversity of linguistic varieties, speech acts and social situations in any one language. It applies not only to language as a means of communication, but also to linguistic and cultural competence that involves oral and written communication, as well as understanding and reflecting upon texts. It also implies being able to combine and transfer linguistic and cultural competences from one area to another, from one language to another. Plurilingualism is therefore an aim that involves developing a broad basis for understanding the diversity of language use, written and oral, and for being able to receive as well as produce a diversity of text forms used in society.

LE - a joint concept for a broad language competence

LE contests the notion of different purposes for different languages within the school curriculum. All language learning and development have in fact a joint purpose of plurilingualism, although there are different conditions for mother tongue, second language and foreign language learning in school and society. The simple fact that the learner generally has an advanced mastery of mother tongue(s)

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<sup>1</sup> [www.coe.int/lang](http://www.coe.int/lang)

before entering school, whereas new languages must be acquired from a beginner's level, is an example of how these conditions differ. Still, it may be productive to consider similarities as well as differences in the perspective of a joint purpose. The rationale for this is imbedded in understanding the need for plurilingualism as a result of altered linguistic situations for groups of inhabitants in many European countries.

Mobility across borders and a greater variety of linguistic competences within a country call for an awareness of what kind of linguistic competence is needed for participation in society in different arenas. Schools provide language competence in a broad cultural sense, through specific language teaching, the development of concepts in different subjects, participation and challenges in different genres and cultural forms specific to school subjects, in both arts and scientific traditions. A focus on LE emphasises how language competence is crucial in all learning and in most presentations and documentation of knowledge. For the individual learner the language used for learning in most subjects might be mother tongue, a second language or a foreign language. For this reason learning conditions might initially differ, and even for learners who are taught through their mother tongue, learning conditions might be unequal because of differences of background and social situations. The aim of LE, however, is to compensate for these unequal conditions by providing conditions for equality of linguistic competence for all and developing it as far as possible during the years of schooling. This requires a wide definition of language competence which also includes cultural competence: developing a language for learning, oral communication, reading and writing, abilities for interpretation and reasoning, for analysing oral and written texts in different media, developing awareness of other cultures and text forms, understanding how choice of words, style and expressions create different meanings, developing notions of concepts and genres in different scientific and artistic areas, as well as in the areas of information and entertainment.

LE - aims related to individuals and to society

The aims of LE can be described from the individual's perspective as well as in terms of the benefit for society as a whole. The individual perspective emphasises the importance LE competences have for the learner's trajectory through education, professional and personal life. All the linguistic competences acquired in LS, LAC and FL will be of personal importance in these areas. The links between language and thought and between language and knowledge form the background for claiming that LE competences are a prerequisite for personal development and for succeeding within the educational system and, later, in any job situation.

Developing language implies developing thought and concepts while also developing various ways of thinking and understanding. Most learners enter school with a developed oracy in their mother tongue. Whether this is the official school language or not, it will have to be further developed through specific requirements in school, through additional genres, through emphasis on concepts and precise descriptions and definitions. In addition to this there is a whole tradition of written texts in a variety of genres for various purposes. School can offer a language competence superior to most homes and communities because it fosters language acquisition not only in terms of vocabulary and grammar, but also as a way of thinking, communicating and understanding. The most evident contributions to language competence offered in school are in fact the development of precise and specific scientific concepts, critical thinking, systematic approaches to identifying and analysing problems, flexibility of thought, systematic organisation of ideas,

consideration of controversies in personal utterances, and the ability to distinguish between personal opinions, feelings and facts. In addition, school encourages a knowledge of and feeling for the aesthetic side of language as a way of expressing and exploring human conditions. The learner needs to express thoughts, meet others face to face or through books and other media, and to be challenged in his/her interpretations, actions and attitudes. The totality of these competences should provide the learner with tools for utilitarian purposes as well as possibilities for personal growth.

The aims set for the individual learner of LE are inseparable from the general aims for society. However, it may be useful to distinguish between individual and common aims in order to clarify connections and differences. A perspective that focuses solely on the individual learner may lose sight of the common aims that insist on a specific direction of learning and development. Not all growth is equally valuable and not all information is equally important. The individual may need to follow a personal path in a learning process, but where that path leads is still of consequence. LE competence is based upon a number of society's values and this again means that traditions and values of texts and language must play a part in the learning process and especially in defining final aims. Possibilities for the individual to set personal aims and to choose working methods and material will surely support and strengthen learning, but autonomy does not imply that anything chosen is equally valuable. There must always be a balance between individual and common aims.

## 2. LS - a subject for linguistic and cultural competence

Even if all school subjects contribute to LE competences in different ways, LS is considered the most distinct subject for developing language and text competence. In most European countries LS will have a long and specific tradition of national and political history, and the aims of this subject have often been closely connected to national or political purposes. In many countries and for many individuals this subject is the national language, and often also the mother tongue. On the other hand, this is not always the case. A country may have more than one national language and an individual may have a different mother tongue from that of the subject LS, or indeed, more than one mother tongue. The language of LS might be the learner's mother tongue or it might be a second language. In both cases the learner needs to develop an advanced competence. The diversity of relationships with the language and cultural base for LS in various countries renders complex any general description of aims and content.

We may assume that the general aims for LS in the member states are based on a common philosophy and cultural tradition. However, we may find local variations of emphasis on content and approaches. Most European countries have a long and distinct LS tradition based on their national and political history and, accordingly, set different purposes for the subject. We can assume that these purposes have changed over the years and that content and approaches have changed accordingly. We cannot, however, take for granted that this development has followed the same path in all countries and that the aims and content of LS are identical. But although languages are different and language competences involve different skills and different challenges, we can still assume a common basis for *participation* and *access* to language competences. And we may still be able to describe society and education in terms that are sufficiently similar to distinguish certain common features that influence LS in a modern society.

### *2.1 Altered conditions - altered aims?*

LS has traditionally been a subject designed to develop the abilities of reading, writing and speech connected to text forms of cultural value. Learning how to read and write and developing these abilities over many years, with increasing demands, has been at the core of the subject. In addition, it fosters a knowledge of the language itself and a knowledge of the literary tradition, usually a combination of both fiction and non-fiction.

New text forms and means of communication represent new challenges for LS. Not only are new genres produced through new channels of communication and information, but young people also communicate in new ways through the new means of communication, especially through electronic and data-based media. The notion of reading and understanding texts has a wider meaning if new genres are included in the corpus of texts in LS. Thus the need for broadening the repertoire of tools for analysis and interpretation increases. In modern society, texts probably play a more important role than in any earlier period of time. This means that producing texts and understanding texts also play an important role in young people's lives, and constitute a necessary competence for their access to participation in society. They live in a world dominated by language and texts. These texts include both traditional text forms as well as, to a large extent, new genres and multi-modal texts consisting of different modalities: language, sound and images. Learners need to master all these text forms. The impact for LS learning and teaching is multiple: if LS aims to enable learners to participate in and understand the complexity of text forms in society, the aims for the subject must be altered in many curricula. This again may lead to revisions of literary canon and to changes in work forms and perspectives. Needs for practical competences and less obvious but equally important needs concerning personal growth and aesthetic values should all be taken into consideration.

### *2.2 Aims for teaching/learning LS*

LS is the school subject that, more than any other, offers general competences for mastering language. These competences are essential for learning in school and for navigating in society in many cultural settings. The implications of not developing sufficient competence are serious. The four domains of competences listed in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR): knowledge, skills/ know-how, existential competence, ability to learn (*savoir, savoir faire, savoir être* and *savoir apprendre*) might also be useful concepts for LS. The desirable outcome of the learning process is described in terms of competences and exemplified through assessment. The way in which we understand these aims is, however, deeply imbedded in culture and tradition. This again means that to a great extent we can describe and agree upon general competence and criteria for correctness. Criteria for quality, however, may have to be discussed bearing in mind cultural differences.

In discussing aims for LS we must also bear in mind the fact that LS is taught to learners of all ages in a progression over many years. Emphasis on various knowledge issues and skills will naturally vary for different age groups. The examples listed below are meant to cover general aims at the end of schooling.

### *2.3 Aims for building knowledge in LS*

Knowledge content in LS might certainly vary in different countries and indeed we see that the concept of knowledge in the LS has changed historically. An important



distinction in language learning, and in fact in all learning, is the distinction between learning *about* something, and learning *within* or *through* the content and the situations offered in the classroom. One distinction is between 'knowledge that' and 'knowledge how', another is between 'knowledge how' and 'knowledge how in interaction with the other'. There is indeed a great difference between a concept of knowledge that is based upon reproduction of something given, and knowledge that demands personal reflection and understanding. The latter will often involve discussions and meta-perspectives on knowledge itself. Normally, content in LS will include both linguistic and literary issues, and often it will include both synchronic and diachronic perspectives. In general terms, we can specify aims for building up knowledge in LS in terms of:

- knowledge of the language:
  - grammar
  - sociolinguistics
  - tools for interpretation and analysis of language and text
  - knowledge of texts:
    - text forms/ genres
    - text linguistics
    - composition
    - media and communication with texts
- knowledge of the textual and linguistic tradition
  - history of language
  - history of literature
  - history of textual communication.

The concept of text in LS classrooms may vary, as may the concept of literature, sometimes meaning fictional texts exclusively, sometimes also non-fictional texts or new text forms in modern media. Choices of literary canon, genres and skills indicate how culture is understood, and how general aims in the curriculum are put into practice. A focus on the learner and the learning process will also indicate how recent theories of learning are perceived and how access to LS knowledge is estimated. The aims of knowledge may be described in a narrow sense, i.e. being able to reproduce concepts and facts. They may, on the other hand, include ways of building knowledge, strategies for combining and exploring knowledge, and understanding how knowledge has been produced and critically analysed.

#### *2.4 Aims for the development of skills in LS*

We might sometimes find it difficult to distinguish between knowledge and skills because one is dependent on the other and because all knowledge has a practical aspect; it is presented through practice. However, the distinction has an advantage when it comes to describing differences between content on the one hand, and learner activities and outcomes of learning activities on the other. The main domains of skills in LS are reading, writing, and oral competences. In LS, learning and teaching skills in one of these domains will always benefit from working with the others. The arguments for not separating productive and receptive language skills are strong. However, each of these domains requires a variety of strategies for producing and understanding texts of different genres. The aim for LS is to develop the three categories of skills:

- oral skills:
  - presenting knowledge and experiences
  - participating in discussion
  - presenting / interpreting literary texts
  - giving talks on various issues
- reading skills:
  - understanding content of both continuous and discontinuous written texts
  - interpreting and reflecting upon literature of all genres
  - understanding and analysing a broad spectrum of textual forms
  - communicating reading experiences
  - learning from written texts
- writing skills:
  - mastering linguistic conventions, orthography, grammar etc.
  - composing texts for presenting thoughts and meaning
  - composing texts for practical purposes
  - developing a spectrum of writing strategies for different genres and situations
  - mastering composition systems for different genres
  - mastering tools for gathering information, composing and presenting texts
  - being able to learn from text models and monitoring.

### 2.5 Aims for the development of existential competence - “Bildung”<sup>2</sup> in LS

Existential competence is the CEFR expression for aims of a non-utilitarian character, closely connected to personal growth and cultural values. The German concept of *Bildung* may be appropriate for emphasising the connection between knowledge, art forms and existential competences. The advantage of this concept lies in a focus not only on the individual, but on the individual and cultural values of society. In this context it will also be defined as the counterpart to utilitarian purposes understood as skills developed for practical purposes only. This is, of course, a problematic dichotomy since language competence will almost always have aspects of both, depending on how we define utilitarian.

A focus on *Bildung* emphasises that aims for LS always imply more than competences. A learner might be able to write according to school standards for text construction, spelling and grammar. He/she might even master different genres and produce quite acceptable content. However, we expect more. Written and oral utterances are always made in a social context and will somehow reflect the author’s/speaker’s relationship to other people, other discourses and other texts. An awareness of these circumstances or a lack of such awareness will be imbedded in any utterance. We may say that the *Bildung* element will always emerge in

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<sup>2</sup> BILDUNG (in German) means developing and bringing out the full potential of a human being, based on his/her nature, but stimulated and structured by education (nurture). This dynamic concept encompasses the product or relative state reached by a human being as well as the process of becoming educated/becoming one's own self. During this process the mental, cultural and practical capacities as much as the personal and social competencies are being developed and continuously widened in a holistic way.

linguistic praxis through the degree of self-reflection and awareness of others. This is why *Bildung* is so closely connected to cultural values and traditions.

*Bildung* in school differs from *Bildung* outside school, mainly through the strong focus on knowledge and tradition. In other words, we assume that scientific knowledge and art forms accumulated through history can influence young people in their thinking and understanding and make them participants in a cultural community. We also assume that cultural encounters between learners and knowledge forms make learners not only consumers of cultural values, but also a part of a culture-producing process. Culture is consequently not only something to learn about, but something to participate in. This implies an understanding of culture and *Bildung* as dynamic processes, and of learners as autonomous individuals who are nevertheless dependent on the culture they are born into.

The realisation of the aims of *Bildung* in LS is often viewed as reading literature and participating in classroom discussions. The rationale behind this is that reading and discussion present challenges that need to be addressed. Encounters with different ways of thinking, different life experiences, different opinions and values give new perspectives on the learner's own life. Developing existential competences requires praxis and a variety of specific arenas for cultural meetings and challenges. Thus the way the teacher is "staging" the classroom is a key to developing this competence.

Personal growth and development of identities is a prerequisite for *Bildung*, but is not equivalent to *Bildung*. A learner may develop many identities. *Bildung* demands identities based on certain cultural standards and values. In our pluralistic societies we may not completely agree upon these values, but in educational settings we normally agree on some basic ones. Respect for the tradition of knowledge and scientific thinking, and judgement, tolerance and generosity towards others, critical thinking and the exploration of one's own reasoning, flexibility of mind, the courage to express personal opinions, are some of these values that can hardly be expressed as competences and are not easily assessed. However, we have to include them in language education as part of the general aims. If not we lose important aspects. They will be part of all aims for all subjects, but have specific implications for language use and language understanding. Some of them can be expressed as follows:

- consideration of "the other"
- critical thinking and sound judgement
- flexibility in thinking and argumentation
- courage to express personal opinions
- expressing understanding and experiences
- exploring one's own thinking and values.

## 2.6 Aims for the development of the ability to learn in LS

Language competences are keys to learning in all school subjects. We know that unsuccessful learners often have inadequate learning strategies, and that an emphasis on these may help learners to learn. A focus on meta-linguistics and a broader repertoire of strategies for reading, writing and speech seem to be ways of strengthening the ability to learn. In LS this will mean very specific strategies for composing texts in various genres and for reading texts for different purposes.

A prerequisite for learning to learn is for the learner to be made an agent in his/her own learning processes. This again requires specific teacher strategies for

communication with learners and for staging learning situations. Some of these strategies may involve process-oriented approaches, learner participation, learner autonomy, a variety of work forms, altered communication forms between teacher and learner, self-assessment and a meta-perspective on teaching content as well as on student work.

Traditionally, we assumed that learning to learn has been an ability acquired intuitively over years of schooling. We have, however, discovered that that this is not necessarily the case. Many learners will have to acquire this as a skill in addition to other skills at school. Not only do learners learn through different approaches and preferences, they often need help in order to identify these approaches. Through reflection they can learn to be aware of what they do when they succeed, not just how they fail. Through self-assessment they can learn to see their own work from new perspectives and participate in their progress. The following abilities may be mentioned here as educational aims:

- self-assessment
- approaches and strategies for student work

### 3. Aims for teaching/learning language across the curriculum (LAC)

In all school subjects, knowledge and skills are to a large extent presented and acquired through language. Learners read, write, talk and listen during learning processes. Each subject contributes to the learner's understanding and thinking by introducing concepts and genres specific to its area of scientific knowledge. In this respect, all teachers are language teachers, although they are not LS teachers or FL teachers. On the one hand, the learner needs to master language in order to be able to learn in different subjects; on the other hand, a focus on language itself provides new possibilities for the learners to learn. Writing as a means of learning across the curriculum is an example of this. Reading and writing strategies are also learning strategies. The meta-perspective on language and the learning-to-learn skill developed in LS or FL through response to and mediation of written and oral texts seem to have positive effects on all learning across the curriculum.

Not only does every subject contribute to learners' competences, it is also important that all subjects undertake a joint responsibility for linguistic development within limits defined by the specific aims of the subject. A variety of teaching methods that enhance abilities to use language in varied ways will also enhance learning processes.

Aims for teaching/learning LAC:

- developing subject specific concepts and genres
- developing varied strategies for learning through language use
- developing meta-perspectives on knowledge
- learning to learn
- developing mediation skills
- developing cognitive academic language proficiency

### 4. Aims for teaching/learning foreign languages (FL)

*The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)* presents aims for foreign language learning and teaching that shall not be repeated here. Within a frame of LE there are, however, some perspectives to be added, especially the

perspective of convergence between LS and FL. LS and FL learning and teaching in school will in many ways have a joint purpose: the development of text competence, language and genre awareness and intercultural competences. Developing competences in one language might strengthen competences in another. Knowing more than one language provides possibilities for a wider scope concerning language, text and culture, also for LS. The idea that language learning does not only have a utilitarian purpose, but above all serves identity development and cultural purposes provides a basis on which to build a platform for convergences between LS and FL.

The fact that LS and FL in European classrooms are often taught in a multicultural context, where the learners' preconceptions of language and culture might be more varied than is often assumed, is in itself an argument for enhancing convergences between LS and FL. Intercultural perspectives, comparative perspectives on language and text might not only make language classrooms more inclusive, but might also enhance knowledge of language as well as of culture. In a perspective of plurilingualism it seems obvious that language acquisition does not only give access to communication in a language, but also provides strategies for navigating between languages and variations of language use.

When FL acquisition has reached an advanced level, the content and aims of LS and FL seem to converge. We cannot, however, ignore the differences. Language competences are based on both linguistic and cultural aspects. Acquiring linguistic skills takes time and requires effort, but can probably be done more easily than mastering subtle cultural norms imbedded in both language and culture. Whereas FL learners will need to develop their competences in communicative interaction without being confronted with a demand for absolute correctness of grammar and vocabulary or subtle cultural distinctions, LS learners meet other challenges in other areas. Gradually they need to master reading and writing with a deep understanding of cultural codes in text and context. Normally the basis for cultural competences in LS classrooms is tacitly implied and only partly taught explicitly. In FL, it is part of explicit language acquisition. Additional aims for or strengthened perspectives on FL in terms of possible convergences could be the following:

- plurilingualism
- intercultural awareness within a scope of existential competences
- convergences between FL and LS in content and methods
- convergences between FL1, FL2, FL3, etc.