



INTERNATIONAL LEGAL GUARANTEES FOR THE PROTECTION OF NATIONAL MINORITIES AND PROBLEMS IN THEIR IMPLEMENTATION

WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON MINORITY EDUCATION

Language and educational matters - Experiences of the monitoring work of the Committee of Experts by Jarmo Lainio Member of the Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*

Introductory remarks

I would like to start my presentation by making two introductory remarks. First, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages have both been recurrently referred to in the different presentations and in the comments of this meeting. If one would like to make a simple but still, as I see it, a fair summary of the two conventions, one might say that the Framework Convention, especially with regard to the educational sphere, mainly deals with the **child and the users of languages**, and as a consequence of this, with the well-being of minority groups and their languages. The Charter could in a similar vein be referred to as mainly dealing with the minority **languages per se**, and as a consequence of this, with the well-being of the child and the users of the language. The Charter, and this should be kept in mind, does in fact concentrate on the languages, basically from a cultural point of view. It is of course not always fully possible to separate the users of a language from the cultural status and existential conditions of a language, in practice.

Secondly, the main purposes of the Charter are to **protect** and **promote** regional and minority languages, and to support states to deal with them from a **proactive** point of view. In addition, the promotion of and support for the languages should further the use of them in both **private** and **public** spheres, i.e. it represents a holistic perspective. This emanates from the experience that a broad scope – a deep and broad usage of the language – strengthens the social and cultural functions of the language, reinforces the user's capacity to use the language, and, develops the language as a code, to fulfil a wide variety of its linguistic tasks.

Consequences of a holistic approach

As a result of the latter point made, the **educational system cannot stand by itself**, nor does it suffice that language promotion or protection actions for Regional or minority languages (hereafter: RML's) only deals with the educational sector. Furthermore, this concerns both the majority and the minority involvement in matters concerning the position of RML's. Whatever option for a language protected

* Opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the Committee of Experts.

by the Charter is chosen by a State, it should be borne in mind that educational aspects and other domains in which the language is used complement each other. Isolated efforts within education can be expected to be less successful compared to when many aspects are considered for the supportive measures of authorities: parental involvement, teacher availability, teaching materials, teacher education partly belong to the educational field but go beyond that, but also attitudes in and outside of school vis-à-vis the language, up-dated information about and the conception of the language group, for example in the media, as well as the position of the language in various public domains, can be mentioned as examples of such other aspects.

Consequences of a restricted access and support to a minority language may further be, if the languages do not have or fulfil the extensive demands of a full societal coverage, that the language remains or becomes inadequate for public use, and ultimately also of lesser value for private use. By using languages and supporting a broad perspective of possibilities to use them in all aspects of private and public life, the potential of the languages will also promote both the status and the prestige of the languages. One may say that a wide societal use and varied functions of a language go hand in hand with an improved status and a linguistic enrichment of the language. This means that the codification and standardisation of a language also need to target a broad perspective, even if the process may need to have initial and intermediate goals for the process, such as developing vocabulary for specific purposes, for children's or adults' language use domains. Education as such further fosters and develops formal language use, i.e. the use of different styles and genres, as well as literacy aspects of language use, and is thus essential for the symbiosis between societal functions, values and linguistic capacity.

General obstacles for the promotion of regional or minority languages within education

Attitudes are central to many of the aspects of the issues discussed here. One way of involving both majority language (=Majlang) and minority language (=Minlang) representatives via the educational system is to offer subject **teaching in the Majlang and in the Minlang** in parallel. The proportion of the instruction taking place in the Majlang and Minlang respectively, places the option either at a more demanding and supportive end ('maximalistic' options), with a substantial part taught in the Minlang, or at the weaker end, with at least some subjects taught in the Minlang ('minimalistic' options). Bilingual education using both languages as languages of instruction, fosters individual bilinguality in the long run and promotes both the State language and the Minlang. It also supports the development of a more balanced dual or multiple identity formation. One of the sources of inspiration in this respect has been – since their initiation in the 1960s – the Canadian Immersion programmes, the social, political and educational effects of which have shown that both Maj and Min groups' attitudes are possible to influence on a large scale, through changes of public educational options.

Structures of support through education are central as well. A general difficulty for many of the RML's is that the structures of planning and implementing education for the Maj society are seldom fit to protect and promote RML's. Size and numbers of individuals belonging to the Min group, as well as the physical/geographical distribution are for example necessary to take into account. The Charter opens up for individualized treatment of each language. The adaptation to the specifics of each language among other things means that the number of pupils is regularly smaller than for Maj classes. The acceptance of this is a prerequisite for education in weaker RML's with dispersed and sparse populations.

Other similar factors to take into account are, that series of produced teaching materials for Minlangs may need additional support and that teacher education may need to take into account and adapt to the educational traditions of the language group in question. The aim of the Charter has also become to ensure **long-lasting and structured planning and implementation** for the Minlang, rather than supporting through short-term project-like activities. This is a major obstacle to the establishment of Minlang institutions and it is not restricted to the educational field. This, however, is something that a Minlang to some extent shares with a Majlang.

How to accommodate minority language education and the learning of the official language

One conclusion shared by my colleagues presenting contributions during the conference, is that **instruction through the medium** of the Minlang and the Majlang is a type of best practice, promoting simultaneously the learning of both the Maj and the Min languages in parallel with content learning. Bilingual education, despite its many possible designs and models, implies the use of the Minlang as a means of learning, thinking, reading, writing and discussing aspects of content. From other sources we also know, that second language learning/acquisition from the onset of the early years of primary schooling, takes time to become a functioning model. About 5-6 years is regularly mentioned as the time it takes at the individual, child level to create a basis for a deeper competence, i.e. for cognitively more demanding aspects of language use.

There is a difference in treatment of weaker and stronger languages. If one considers experiences from the more successful and stronger cases, the following may be concluded, which receives support from international research. In practice this tends to mainly concern Part III languages in the Charter ratifications. Keywords seem to be: fairly **early contact and use of both languages**, privately and within the institutional frame of instruction, **multifaceted use** of both languages (various domains, persons of different ages), **demanding use** and **prolonged use** of both languages. However, this is regularly not possible to arrange easily for the weaker languages. For a seriously threatened language there may also be reason to postpone the onset of Majlang instruction, beyond pre-school level to primary school level.

If one manages to involve families of the Maj society to share the enterprise of bilingual education, this seems to if not guarantee then at least strongly promote the development of the Minlang and its social as well as cultural position. Examples of this can be found in at least the Basque country, Wales, Catalonia and Finland, through the existence of the immersion school systems. One example we can refer to is Spain, and the trilingual education models in the Basque country. One of the model options, "Model D", which includes instruction in Basque and Spanish for both Spanish-speaking and Basque-speaking children, has become a well functioning and increasingly more popular option. In the Basque bilingual models, also English is to an increasing degree used as a language of instruction, from early years.

Through the education system it is obvious that the involvement of both Maj and Min language-speaking children in the same bilingual programmes, fosters the mutual acceptance of each other. One can also, as a result of the Basque experience conclude the following: in those families, who choose not to put their children into the choices targeting bilingualism (like model "D"), this neither promotes an increased understanding of the other language group through the school choice, nor does the content of the educational programme foster such understanding, since the other group is largely unavailable for direct contacts and is thus not presented as belonging to "normality" in the society. Reversely, those families that actually do choose the bilingual option for their Majlang children, also receive an enhanced input that strengthens the efforts of this choice, since the educational model/option also contributes through its content (and language use) to an increased understanding of each other. Such immersion and dual bilingual programmes have in a wider context also shown that drop-out rates are positively affected by the programmes.

Awareness-raising of national minorities on opportunities for being taught their minority language or for receiving instruction in their language(s)

One aspect of awareness-raising, present in the successful revitalisation of Welsh, is the widespread and continuous information campaigns among parents-to-be and young parents about the advantages of bilingualism, both in the short-term family perspective and for the development and importance of a bilingual capacity later in life for the children. This implies involvement of staff in pre-schools and nursery schools. This in turn depends on the planning and implementation of the educational structures, and of such information campaigns. These initiatives may come from above, but they need

to include the grass-root level. This is not only the responsibility of the parents and non-governmental organisations, NGO's, but can also be a natural part of state/public responsibility.

Another aspect of this promotional work through the school is that good models and access to the language in practice, for example in the media, increases the prestige of the language in the eyes of children. Both the Welsh S4C channel and the Scottish Gaelic ("Itchy coo" -project) TV productions of materials and programmes directed to children are examples of this.

Similar types of revitalisation work to some extent seems to be implemented also among the Sami in the Nordic countries. The existence of strong institutions is a prerequisite for this, matched by state funding. Also among the Sami a positive attitudinal change has first taken place as a result of a long process, and later on attempts have occurred more widely to regain knowledge in the lost language. One method of teaching the language to children, when the parental generation has lost the capacity to use it has been to test the "language nest" principle among some Sami groups (originally developed among the Maori population in New Zealand). This means that grandparents are actively engaged in the use and transmission of the Minlang to small children, in pre-schools etc.

Possible measures to be taken by the States to ensure adequate opportunities to be taught the minority language(s)

It seems clear that an early start, **follow-up instruction** and **continued support** throughout the educational system is necessary, in order to fulfil the task of promoting the Minlang. This means that staff and teachers, that are bilingual but also professionally trained, are important. This is especially important during the linguistically "founding years", i.e. at least until the age of 6-7, but for biological, social and cognitive reasons the importance of continuous support also after that is necessary, until the age of 14-15. And once again, the better results seem to come through instruction in the language, rather than of the language.

Financial measures to be taken to ensure proper minority language education

If one tries to summarize experiences from an economy point of view, the following can be concluded:

- Allowing smaller instruction groups/classes reinforces long-term gain, even if this in the short run could increase initial costs.
- Support for parental involvement is needed, and it could also, at least to some extent, be salary work. The involvement and visibility of Minlang representatives in schools, in media and other public positions in society, both as integrated parts of society and as activists, can create positive models for the growing generation of both Minlang and Majlang groups.
- Teaching materials – internal vs. external: the experience is often that the teaching materials need to be both linguistically and culturally adapted to the situation in which the child grows up and is socialized into. This may mean, that teaching materials from a kin-state, in cases where the language is spoken elsewhere, fit poorly to meet the needs of the Minlang children. The market economy of this type of material is however generally quite poor. It therefore is essential that other means of producing materials are developed, e.g. through cooperation between teachers, and production of materials in the Internet, but foremost it means that public support is needed.

Minority language teacher education is clearly a key to any progressive development, and needs to be assessed at all levels, from pre-school to secondary grammar level (corresponding). At the same time, this support for a rather independent structure of the educational system, also promotes the positive image of the Min group, since in many contexts the teacher as a professional holds fairly high prestige within society. This means that the spin-off effect of contributing to the creation of a "middle-class" layer among the minority population is that it also promotes the establishment of the language in a

wider perspective, having to do with social and language political power relations, human as well as educational capital and thus, social careers. For example for Roma pupils this is an example of a possible positive development, fostering a higher degree of social integration.

Final remarks

To sum up, it should in the end not be a surprise that at least the following matters should be considered for a more successful protection and promotion of the Minlanguages according to the spirit of the Charter, and taking into account the educational aspects:

- education is central, but it does not function in isolation,
- involvement and visibility of key actors is important for both the status and prestige of the Minlangs, both as models for the minority representatives and as realistic co-operators for the Maj group, e.g. teachers, journalists, cultural workers, administrators, politicians etc.
- information in/through the media, in more neutral ways, is important in order to “normalize” the presence of the Min groups and languages in any given society,
- efforts should be made to create layers of knowledgeable representatives among the Maj group, regarding the language and its cultural background, in order to establish an empathetic support for the language; bilingual or immersion programmes represent one method in the long run,
- in order for the outcome to be good, it does cost for the Maj society as well– at least initially – but it pays back for most groups, in saved long-term costs,
- the possibility to have early, continuous, extensive, demanding and prolonged contact with the languages, promotes bilingualism and thus biculturalism,
- instruction in rather than on the language gives better results in the end, both for language and content development in the school setting, and,
- proactivity is a key concept, and this process should involve representatives of both Maj and Min groups.

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