

Learner autonomy, agency, and critical thinking

[Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec\(2022\)1 on the importance of plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture](#)

Measures

- b. xiii. encourage pedagogical approaches that empower learners by developing their autonomy and their critical thinking skills, make space for the learner's voice, create a democratic classroom and school culture and prepare learners for lifelong learning;
- b. xiv. encourage pedagogical approaches that develop learners' language and cultural awareness and equip them to engage in intercultural dialogue;
- c. vi. helping teachers to develop the pedagogical competences needed to support a democratic classroom culture that fosters autonomous learning and critical thinking and makes space for the inclusion of the learner's voice.

What is it about?

Plurilingual and intercultural education considers learners as social agents who are empowered through the development of the following abilities:

Learner autonomy: the ability to take charge of one's own learning, identifying needs, setting goals, planning learning, managing their study and monitoring results, all in a process of learning to learn.

Learner agency: the willingness and ability to make choices, take and act on decisions, evaluate their outcomes and, as a result, reflect and self-regulate.

Critical thinking: the ability to analyse, evaluate, and interpret information logically and objectively. It involves questioning assumptions, considering different perspectives, and making reasoned judgments to solve problems or understand complex ideas.

Why is this important and what can be done?

These abilities help learners to act in the social world and exert agency in the learning process by exploiting all available linguistic resources in order to communicate and co-construct meaning in interaction.

Curriculum and teaching approaches should prioritise individual and collective agency, promoting learner autonomy and critical thinking. Activities should encourage learners to utilise their language skills to set goals, organise learning tasks, and evaluate outcomes. Collaborative, action-oriented projects can enhance this learning experience, helping learners create artifacts or performances. As social agents they become effective language learners, prepared for lifelong learning and active participation in democratic culture. (See Explanatory Memorandum 5.b.xiii-xiv)

See also Toolbox Entries on [Action-oriented approach](#) and [Complex learning environments](#).

Council of Europe resources for policy/decision makers

Resource 1: [Learners as social agents](#)

This short 5-minute video explains the concept of the learner as a social agent, which is central to plurilingual and intercultural education. It begins with a brief introduction of the CEFR and explanation of the way the concept of social agency encourages lifelong language learning. Then, in the main part of the video (4 minutes) three primary and secondary school teachers (one Italian, one Belgian, one German) explain what considering learners as social agents means for them in their classes.

This video gives policymakers an overview of ways in which social agency can be implemented in real world-oriented tasks at different levels in different contexts, with teachers sharing responsibility with the learners in that process. This may be of assistance when developing guidelines that highlight the importance of making space in the curriculum and/or teacher education for agency, autonomy and critical thinking.

Resource 2: [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages - Companion volume](#)

See especially [Chapter 2](#)

The CEFR Companion Volume (CEFR-CV) updates and extends the 2001 CEFR, which provided a common basis for developing language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, and textbooks, supporting the alignment of curriculum, teaching, and assessment. It includes the complete set of updated and extended CEFR descriptors, replacing those from 2001. These now also cover areas such as mediation, online interaction, plurilingual and pluricultural competence, and sign language competences. The CEFR-CV offers a vision of language learning and use in which learners are viewed as active, responsible participants in society, using language to achieve real-life goals and engage meaningfully with others.

The CEFR-CV – especially [Chapter 2](#) (pp. 27-45) – gives policy-makers an overview of the origins and aims of the CEFR and explains its vision of language education, focusing on key concepts and ways in which the CEFR descriptors are intended to be used, as well as correcting some common misconceptions.

Please note: this resource is also useful for teacher educators.

Council of Europe resources for teacher educators/ pedagogical advisors

Resource 1: [Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture](#) (RFCDC)

Especially in section in Volume 1: [Skills: Autonomous learning skills; Analytical and critical thinking skills – etc.](#)

The Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) is particularly relevant for curriculum developers. It offers a model of the competences learners need in order to participate effectively in a culture of democracy and live peacefully with others in culturally diverse democratic societies. It defines a framework of values, attitudes, skills and knowledge & critical understanding, and provides descriptors for these aspects. It comes in three volumes: (i) the framework itself; (ii) the descriptors, and (iii) guidance for implementation.

The RFCDC, especially the section referred to above, develops in more detail many of the more generic educational concepts mentioned in Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)1 on The Importance of Plurilingual and Intercultural Education and in the CEFR Companion Volume. With its conceptual explanations and its descriptors, it thus provides rich raw material to inspire (student) teachers to promote plurilingual and intercultural education.

Please note: this resource is also useful for policy makers.

Resource 2: [A Guide to Action-oriented, Plurilingual and Intercultural Education](#)

Especially:

[Section 4.2. The Action-oriented approach](#)

[Chapter 5. Curriculum design for action-oriented, plurilingual and intercultural language education](#)

This Guide outlines the educational vision of the CEFR Companion Volume, explaining crucial aspects of plurilingual and intercultural education. It summarises work of the Council of Europe in language learning, outlines reasons why language education has difficulty moving forward, summarises theoretical inputs to action-oriented, plurilingual and intercultural education, and explains implications of implementing it, citing Council of Europe resources and relevant academic literature.

The Guide gives a good overview of Council of Europe resources (with links) on different aspects of plurilingual and intercultural education as well as providing orientation for teacher educators and curriculum developers on how to implement it.

Resource 3: ECML resource introducing learner autonomy in teacher education :

https://www.ecml.at/Portals/1/resources/Articles%20and%20publications%20on%20the%20ECML/Little_Learner%20autonomy.pdf