

Samúel Lefever, Assistant Professor
Iceland University of Education

This article appeared in Vol. 21/1 of Málfríður, the magazine for language teachers in Iceland.

The role of language teaching – looking to the future

A great deal of discussion and debate has been taking place in Europe about the future of language education and its important role in society. The following extract is taken from a policy paper produced for the Council of Europe in the Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe, 2003:

The Council of Europe and its member States have taken the position that it is the promotion of linguistic diversity which should be pursued in language education policy. For in addition to mobility, intercomprehension and economic development, there is the further important aim of maintaining the European cultural heritage, of which linguistic diversity is a significant constituent. This means then that language teaching must be seen as the development of a unique individual linguistic competence ('knowing' languages whichever they may be) and also as education for linguistic tolerance.

This policy is reflected in broad aims of language teaching currently being discussed in Europe.

- The development of European citizenship, with an educated European understanding several languages, able to study and travel in many countries, knowledgeable about and with respect for many different nationalities and national or ethnic cultures
- The commitment to life-long language learning, accepting that it is unlikely that schools can predict exactly which languages their students are going to need, and that therefore the aim should be to train them to become good language learners, capable of acquiring language skills based on their own needs as they meet them.
- The idea that language study offers opportunities to acquire independence and autonomy as learners, that it can be learnt in ways which encourage cooperation and other social values.

(Heyworth, 2003)

The first aim calls for an integration of teaching about cultural similarities and differences into the subject matter of language learning. It goes beyond the kind of stereotypes often presented in language courses such as the 'strict German' or the 'eccentric Englishman'. It would include raising learners' awareness of their own cultural

preconceptions and identity, while learning to appreciate other ways of looking at the world.

The second aim entails changing the focus of language teaching so that the objective is not just to teach a particular language, but to train learners to become good language learners, capable of assessing their language needs and being aware of language learning strategies that suit them best. Examples of language needs could range from survival skills for travel to advanced reading skills for academic purposes.

The final aim is coupled with the belief that language learning is a powerful factor in intellectual development, encouraging open-mindedness and flexibility, and contributing to the development of other skills. Learning a language provides learners with opportunities to take responsibility for their own learning through self-reflection and autonomous learning, if the approaches are effectively used in the learning process. Increased attention is being given to reflective and autonomous learning approaches in Europe as seen in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the European Language Portfolio.

Multicultural Europe

Clearly, one of the main objectives of language education in Europe is to foster the development of a multicultural society and intercultural competence. This objective is drawn from the social reality of today's Europe which is unarguably multicultural and multilingual. Cultures in Europe are mixing at a rate not seen before in history because of ever-increasing globalization and mobility due to the rapid flow of information, relaxed boundaries and cheaper travel.

This trend is being evidenced all over Europe. Statistics from the Council of Europe show that in France, 12 million French citizens do not have French as a mother tongue. Ten percent of the German population is foreign-born. Romania has 19 recognized minorities; Russia 176 culturally and linguistically distinct peoples.

In London 300 languages, from Albanian to Zulu, are spoken by the city's schoolchildren, yet most schools only teach French as a foreign language or perhaps German or Spanish. In many schools in London, 30% or more of the pupils speak another language in addition to English, yet the formal school context does not take into consideration their experiences. Similar statistics can be found in cities scattered throughout Europe. (Tinsley, 2003)

The most recent statistics for the number of languages spoken in Reykjavik come from the city's preschools. At the end of the year 2004, 630 preschool children in Reykjavik have parents who come from 89 different countries. These children speak 52 different languages. So the challenge for language teachers is the same throughout Europe: how to relate language teaching to peoples' experience of the languages around them, and at the same time broaden their experience of the world by introducing them to languages spoken outside their communities.

From monolingual to multilingual

In today's Europe one cannot assume that all learners in a classroom begin from the same monolingual starting point. In a report carried out by the European Commission entitled Foreign Language Teaching in Schools in Europe (Eurydice, 2001) only two countries reported having only one official language and no minority/regional languages - Iceland

and Liechtenstein. But in numerous schools in Iceland, many children do not have Icelandic as their mother tongue.

Similarly, we cannot assume that learners' experiences of other languages are only within a formal educational setting. This is particularly true in countries like Iceland that have extensive access to other languages through the media and a tradition of travel and study in foreign countries. With this in mind it is necessary to adopt a plurilingual perspective which takes into account individuals' varying levels of contact with and competence in a range of different languages, and supports the development of their plurilingual competence. One of the available tools which supports plurilingual competence is the European Language Portfolio. It is designed to recognize language learning experiences both in and outside of formal education, and provide individuals with a record of their achievements in all the languages they have learned.

Which languages should be taught?

The old model of language education in Europe was based on a monolingual view of the nation state with a single national language. One or two 'foreign' languages were offered in the school curriculum. But this model is far too narrow for the needs of the 21st century. With globalization and increasing European integration, we need to look at language education from a wider perspective.

Compared to the rich diversity of languages spoken in Europe, most school systems offer a rather limited range of language options. Most schools focus on high status European languages rather than low status 'immigrant' languages – even when these are world languages like Arabic, Chinese, or Hindi and are highly relevant for economic, social and cultural purposes. Greater emphasis must be placed on the languages which more accurately reflect the citizens' needs and cultural contacts outside the school system. How much do most Icelanders know about Polish or Filipino?

Within a multilingual perspective, all languages add to the individual's plurilingual competence, yet traditionally more emphasis is placed on the teaching of the national language and less support given to the maintenance and development of other mother tongues. Although there is an abundance of research that shows that the development of literacy in the mother tongue supports overall language development, there is still the fear that speaking the home language somehow keeps people from learning the national language.

This is not an easy issue to tackle and often the efforts being made to support immigrant languages take place outside of the school curriculum. This is the case for example in Iceland where the first steps in providing support for immigrant languages and mother tongue maintenance were taken by a group of parents and the Immigrants' Center, a forerunner of the Intercultural Center in Reykjavík. (Miðstöð nýbúa og Alþjóðahúsið) This parent initiative has developed into a very active bilingual education program at the center.

Another example of a neglected language is sign language, which until recently was not fully recognized as a mother tongue. Fortunately there is a growing awareness of the need for the hearing population to learn sign languages and thus make social situations more inclusive to the hearing impaired. Signers also need more opportunities to learn the sign languages of other countries in order to take advantage of opportunities for mobility, interchange and cultural enrichment.

Plurilingualism as a resource

There is a growing awareness of plurilingualism as a resource all across Europe. Teachers who work in multicultural areas have started to develop ways of drawing students' knowledge of different languages into their teaching. This has the dual benefit of improving learning, and giving respect to students' home languages. It also emphasizes that being bilingual or plurilingual is a natural and common phenomenon.

Some of the things that language teachers and schools are doing are language awareness activities. For example, children can do surveys on the number of languages spoken in their class, school, or neighborhood. Children can be encouraged to 'bring and tell' examples of different languages, such as newspapers, storybooks, and listening materials. Students can work with languages by learning songs and rhymes in different languages, and comparing groups of words or, for example, proverbs in different languages. At the more advanced levels, learners can do more sophisticated language comparisons and participate in lingual and cultural exchanges of many kinds.

Differences in the 'culture of learning'

Another important consideration for language teachers and school authorities is the difference between what we call 'cultures of learning'. There is a growing body of research which points to ways in which learners' cultural or linguistic backgrounds affect the way they interact with classroom culture. For example, how much learners are expected to speak in class varies widely between cultures and this can have particular consequences in language classes.

Several interesting studies have uncovered differences of this kind. In a study by Cortazzi and Jin in 1996, perceptions of student behavior were compared between Chinese students and western teachers. One of the cultural differences that came to light was that western teachers view volunteering in class as showing strong interest and participation on the part of the students, while Chinese students viewed it as showing off and preventing teacher talk. This shows how perceptions about what is considered valued classroom behavior can differ greatly between cultures and lead to confusion and disappointment in the classroom.

It is increasingly necessary for teachers to be aware of cultural differences and to adopt classroom approaches that take these differences into account. In some school situations, teachers barely know the names of many of the languages spoken by their pupils, let alone understand the cognitive and cultural differences that may accompany them. Teachers and school personnel need to have access to research into languages and their associated cultures. They should also have basic knowledge of the most commonly represented languages in their schools in order to send out a positive message about the value attached to linguistic diversity.

A new paradigm

In the multilingual, multicultural, and mobile reality of Europe today, we need to view plurilingual competence as a vital skill, and achievable by everyone. If citizens are to play a full role in today's Europe, take advantage of the opportunities open to them and live up to their potential, they will need competence in a range of languages, as well as

positive attitudes towards speakers of languages from outside their immediate communities.

A new paradigm for language education in the 21st century summarizes the main ideas and issues currently being debated within Europe. In this table a comparison is made between the old model of language education and a new one which takes into account new needs and perceptions in the changing face of Europe today.

A new paradigm for language teaching	
Old model	New model
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on nation-state and national language as source of identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasis on European citizenship and the plurilingual individual
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multilingualism is a problem for society 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multilingualism enriches society
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assumes learners start from monolingual base 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Takes into account diverse language experiences outside the classroom as a basis for continued learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bilingualism and diverse cultural backgrounds 'silenced' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bilingualism and diverse cultural backgrounds celebrated
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bilingual children's education is seen as problematic – focus is on developing national language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bilingualism welcomed – focus on developing ability in mother tongue as well as other languages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speakers of other languages are 'foreign' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speaking another language is the norm
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning another language is difficult 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning another language is the norm
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Near-native speaker competence is the ultimate goal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Even low levels of competence are valuable and add to communicative repertoire – to be built on throughout life
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language teaching focuses mainly on linguistic goals. Cultural element tends to be weak, or focused solely on 'high' culture. Static view of culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language teaching has strong cultural element and includes intercultural awareness. Dynamic view of culture
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language learning focuses narrowly on one language at a time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language learning focuses on links between languages, and on developing language awareness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language learning tends to be elitist and problematic for the majority 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language learning can be successful for everyone

(Tinsley, 2003)

What does this new paradigm for language education mean for us in Iceland?

It means that language educators in Iceland need to redefine their role in response to the changing nature of the society which no longer fits to the idea of the monolingual nation state. Modern European societies, including Iceland, are complex environments, increasingly characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity and exchanges between languages and cultures. It is becoming ever more important for us to be able to successfully interact with people with other languages and cultures. In fact, that is what language education is all about: making languages a means of open communication, and providing access to people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. With this understanding, we see that the slogan from the European Year of Languages – LANGUAGES OPEN DOORS – can become a reality in the future.

References

Cortazzi, M. and L. Jin. 1996. 'Cultures of learning: language classrooms in China' in Coleman, H. (ed.): *Society and the Language Classroom*. Cambridge University Press.

Foreign Language Teaching in Schools in Europe. Eurydice, The Information Network on Education in Europe, 2001.

Heyworth, F. 2003. 'Introduction – A new paradigm for language education' in *Facing the Future – Language Educators across Europe*. European Centre for Modern Languages, Council of Europe Publishing.

Tinsley, T. 2003. 'Language policies for a multicultural society' in *Facing the Future – Language Educators across Europe*. European Centre for Modern Languages, Council of Europe Publishing.