



EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR MODERN LANGUAGES

CENTRE EUROPEEN POUR LES LANGUES VIVANTES

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Second medium-term programme of activities 2004-2007

**Project A5 – LangSEN**

**Languages for people with special educational needs**

## **Central workshop report 5/2004**

(Graz, Austria, 7-9 October 2004)

**Co-ordinator:** **Zoltán Poór**, University of Veszprém, Hungary

**Project team:** **Christine Firman**, Education Division, Malta

**Boguslaw Marek**, Catholic University of Lublin, Poland

**Jelena Mazurkiewicz**, School of Primary and Secondary education  
“Milan Petrovic”, Novi Sad, Serbia and Montenegro

**Bencie Woll**, London City University, England, United Kingdom

**Guest speakers:** **David Marsh**, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

**Hilary McColl**, Blairgowrie, Scotland, United Kingdom



This report is accessible in English and in French on the ECML website: <http://www.ecml.at> (**Activities**).

The Executive Director of the ECML should be informed about any full or partial translation of the report and a copy of the translation should be sent to the ECML for information.

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Participants came from 27 member states (Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria: 2, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary: 2, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom) and 1 non member state (Russian Federation). The Spanish nominee was unfortunately prevented from attending. Participants represented ministries or other educational authorities (6), in-service training institutions and resource centres (7). Some were based at universities (7), partly in the capacity of pre-service teacher trainers, while others were based at schools (11). The ration between straightforward Special Educational Needs (SEN) practitioners and modern languages teachers (MLT) or teacher educators was balanced, though there was a significant group of participants were deeply involved in both SEN and MLT.

The objectives of the central activity were to:

- identify the categories and the nature of difficulties to be overcome;
- discuss the findings of neuro-, psycho- and socio-linguistic research related to language acquisition and language learning by people with learning difficulties;
- present examples of existing good practice;
- start a research project to outline the situation of language teaching for people with special educational needs in ECML member states.

Besides the standard ECML pre-workshop questionnaire, we sent out a theme-specific survey to have a clearer picture of various issues in the respective countries. The main questions touched upon:

- the participant's experience of language education in relation to SEN or otherwise;
- the general perspective on language education for children with SEN;
- the degree of inclusion and segregation in relation to language education of children with SEN;
- special curricula and syllabuses for MLT for SEN students;
- special arrangements made for examinations in modern languages for SEN students;
- the qualification of teachers involved in MLT to SEN students;
- training teachers for the context;
- support and resource services;
- teaching and learning sign languages and languages education for the deaf .

The information accumulated helped us adjust the original plans to the estimated needs.

In the evening of our preparatory day, the night before the workshop started we invited the participants to meet up in an informal setting at one of the local cafés. That helped us 'break the ice' and create some community spirit and sense of belonging.

The workshop started with the regular welcome and introduction to the ECML and the initial information about the nature of the project by the co-ordinator which was followed by some team-building activities.

**The theme-setting talk by Bencie Woll on language acquisition and language learning** reviewed the literature and current theoretical positions on the development of L1 and L2, and then related these to questions about language learning by individuals with SEN. Differences between L1 and L2 were discussed in relation to the contrast often made between ‘acquisition’ of L1 as related to the Critical Period Hypothesis, and ‘learning’ of L2, viewed as similar to the learning of other areas of skills and knowledge.

**David Marsh reported on ongoing research on language education to people with SEN in the EU member states and beyond** and related it to the objectives of the LangSEN project. The findings of the research were not made public since the report had not been approved by the European Commission at the time of the ECML workshop, but the methodology of the research and the main trends identified by the research team were outlined.

The first day of the workshop was concluded by **group discussions followed by plenary reports that focused on national policies related to SEN and modern language education:**

- National curriculum: who is excused from language education and why?
- National assessment: are there adaptations of national testing and examination criteria and methodologies depending on SEN in relation to differing abilities?
- Implementation:
  - What languages are taught and learnt in the respective countries and what is their position (i.e. first or second language, foreign language, etc.)?
  - At what age can SEN learners start language education?
  - Who teaches languages to students with SEN? What kind of qualifications and experience do teachers engaged in SEN-related language education have?
  - How, where and by whom is the professional growth of these professionals provided?

The discussions and the follow-up reports gave the participants and the co-ordinating team a general view on the situation in the ECML member states.

**Hilary McColl** argued for ‘**languages for all**’ in her keynote speech on the second day. She has been convinced that the work one does in modern languages, when one gets it right, one can enrich the lives of children with SEN in ways that no other subject has the potential to do, and sometimes in very unexpected ways. One can already find many children with SEN learning foreign languages, enjoying the experience, and proud of their achievements. This is interesting, since in mainstream schools one can find some pupils who are clearly not enjoying the experience. She discussed the reasons and the ways one can make a good language programme and make sure one gets it right. She came up with a convincing argument in favour of including an element of foreign language learning and cultural study in the curriculum of every child as one does not know what benefits are withheld from them if one denies them even the opportunity to try.

A series of talks addressed specific categories of SEN in relation to language, hearing and visual abilities:

**Christine Firman's presentation aimed at giving participants a brief overview of dyslexia and its various manifestations.** The objective of the presentation was to bring to the attention of the group members a number of issues which are normally raised in discussions and meetings with MFL teachers.

**Bencie Woll briefly introduced terminology relating to the education of deaf children,** specifically distinguishing monolingual approaches (including oralism) from bilingual or dual language education (use of a spoken/written language and a sign language). Some myths about sign language were addressed, and it was emphasised that sign languages were independent natural languages with their own complex grammars. Approaches to language education were reviewed, including programmes where children were taught foreign spoken/written languages, and others where children were taught foreign sign languages. In addition, there was a brief discussion of the possibilities of offering sign languages as language-options for hearing children and adults wishing to learn another language.

**Boguslaw Marek gave an insight into the nature of teaching languages to the blind** and discussed the rationale and techniques that characterise the methodology and the specific teaching materials developed for this community.

**Real cases of English language teaching in a SEN setting were demonstrated by Jelena Mazurkiewicz** in the afternoon. First she demonstrated a few activities typical of the Communicative Approach, providing evidence for its implementation in work with children with SEN. Afterwards she brought up several examples of English classes for children with different categories of SEN. The purpose of this presentation was to draw attention to the possibilities in teaching foreign languages to SEN students.

The group discussions in the second half of the afternoon offered the chance to present some 'good practice' in SEN-related language education. The case studies dealt with the following issues:

- SEN-focused training programme for secondary school teachers of modern languages (France);
- SEN-oriented professional development of teachers via producing resources (Austria);
- Teenagers with SEN and the choice of learning a third foreign language (Sweden);
- Social and psychological support to language learners with SEN (Armenia);
- The view of a practising teacher in relation to teaching English to children with SEN (Poland);
- English for children with SEN in relation to cognitive abilities (Romania);
- The case of 7 adult language learners with SEN (Iceland);
- Language education of people with SEN related to hearing abilities (Croatia);
- Bilingual education of deaf students (Lithuania);
- Teaching English to blind children (Hungary);
- The case of a language-impaired child (Norway);
- Materials for dyslectic learners of German (The Netherlands);
- The case of 8-9-year old children whose first language is English (Andorra).

The case studies were presented and discussed in four different groups (three to four examples in each), the results of which were reported on in a follow-up plenary session. Further evidence of 'good practice' was available in a display of posters, tools and resources.

The keynote plenary address on the third day, delivered by **Zoltán Poór**, focused on the **professional competencies teachers need in order to facilitate the language learning of pupils with SEN**. The speaker challenged the structures, attitudes and approaches of institutions of higher education responsible for the pre-service training of teachers of MLT and SEN alike. He articulated the need for MLT-specific training and development of SEN teachers and the SEN-related education of ML teachers alike.

The highlight of the workshop was the identification of themes for further research and the setting-up of networks to obtain information to be published on the website and in a final publication in due course. The themes participants signed up for are:

- Creating a multilingual glossary of SEN and MLT related terminologies;
- SEN-related MLT curricula and syllabuses;
- SEN-related ML teaching materials and methodology;
- Testing and assessment in MLT to SEN students;
- SEN-related ML teacher education.

The members of the co-ordinating team allocated themselves to a network each, with responsibility for monitoring communication within the network and for the development of materials. The networks are co-ordinated by enthusiastic workshop participants with specific interest and expertise in the respective fields. The foci, timeframes and modes of co-operation were defined by the network teams themselves.