The right to education and language proficiency
A (pan-)European view

1. Introduction

1.1 The right to education is enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of the Council of Europe, and other international instruments. This right can only be fully exercised if learners have the language competences expected by the school. So, equal access to the full curriculum is highly dependent on language proficiency which determines whether learners can meet the expectations of the curriculum and proceed successfully through each successive stage of education.

1.2 All learners have an entitlement to quality education. Young people may be denied this entitlement or disadvantaged in their attempt to exercise it because of a lack of certain language competences. They may come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and come to school without the secure foundation that others enjoy, or they may be migrant children or indigenous minorities who are competent in one or more languages but have difficulty with the language of instruction in school. The more abstract, formal and structured ‘academic’ language of the school can be quite different from the vernacular language variety of many learners.

2. Towards a framework of reference for language education

2.1 The Council of Europe (Directorate of Education and Languages, Language Policy Division) has therefore begun to develop a framework of reference for the main languages of schooling to support our member states in their efforts to raise achievement in language.

Please note that we are addressing two dimensions of the languages of schooling:

- Language as a subject, which focuses on the specific teaching of language as a school subject and
- Language across the curriculum, which focuses on the language learning that takes place in all subjects.

In fact, there is a tendency in many European countries to compartmentalise the curriculum, and to view language as a subject in isolation from other subjects, as if it alone were responsible for developing all the necessary language skills. However, because learning a subject and developing language competence go hand in hand, we are emphasising the need to pay closer attention to the contribution of other school subjects to language education, defined as
‘language across the curriculum’. Language education takes place in all subjects, although often in a more hidden way than in language as a subject.

We are concerned with language across the curriculum not merely as a tool to be mastered for communication purposes but equally as a transversal instrument for learning, personal development, creative expression, developing culture and values, for socialisation and identity building, for developing critical capacities and autonomous learning and thinking.

2.2 The new Council of Europe reference framework will include a description of the language and other communicative competences (e.g. semiotic competences) expected of learners and the kinds of learning experiences they need in order to acquire these. These expectations are seen as a learners’ entitlement, their fundamental right for successful learning and social inclusion. As to the scope of the new reference framework under development, one of our main tasks is to elaborate an inventory of learners’ entitlements in terms of plurilingual and intercultural language education encompassing all the languages and language varieties present in the school. The aim is to match up these entitlements with specifications of learning objectives that will allow the subsequent construction of standards and profiles at different stages of schooling.

These entitlements relate to:

- the unique and dynamic language repertoire of each learner;
- the official language(s) as subject(s) and as means of instruction across the curriculum;
- languages of minorities, regional languages, languages of migrants that are part of the plurilingual repertoires of learners and/or part of the school curriculum – whether taught as subjects or used as languages of instruction;
- foreign languages as taught subjects and/or as means of instruction for some other subjects.

2.3 We are in effect developing an overarching framework for plurilingual and intercultural education that embodies a commitment to the key values of the Council of Europe (human rights; genuine, participatory democracy; and rule of law) and is linked to the promotion of democratic citizenship, social inclusion, and respect for diversity – diversity of languages and cultures, of ethnic and social groups.

2.4 This new instrument will complement our existing Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, which is concerned with foreign and second languages. This is a tool to promote plurilingualism and respect for the plurilingual repertoires of individuals. It includes language competence standards which are very widely used not only in Europe but on other continents, and the framework document has been translated into almost 40 languages, including Japanese, Chinese and Arabic.

2.5 The type of work in education I have been describing is concerned with developing common reference tools for language education which of course are not normative or binding in any way, unlike our European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. This is a Convention, the only instrument in the world devoted exclusively to the protection of the linguistic heritage. Each of the 23 states which have ratified the Charter is monitored on how it implements the specific commitments it has undertaken in its instrument of ratification. My colleague, Sonia Parayre, will present the Charter in more detail in Workshop 4 dealing with standard-setting instruments.
3. Conclusion

3.1 Let me conclude by saying that language education must take account of the plurality and heterogeneity of learners and of learning contexts because:

- all societies are multilingual and multicultural, albeit in different ways;
- all schools are environments open to a plurality of languages and cultures;
- all languages are plural;
- all identities are plural;
- all types of education are plurilingual and intercultural to varying degrees;
- all types of plurilingual and intercultural education are actualised in a specific context: there is no one recipe or recommended methodology.

3.2 Plurilingual and intercultural education is a challenge, an obligation as well as an opportunity for the future of our societies. It must be based on the language of schooling, which is a subject taught and the main vehicle for other types of disciplinary teaching, while also recognising learners’ entitlement to develop their unique language repertoires and their intercultural competences. And I suggest it is only in this way that the key goals of education relating to personal development and social integration of the learner can be fulfilled.