

Policy Papers

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Policy review: The role of assessment in European language policy - a historical overview

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- European language policy is led by two intergovernmental institutions: the Council of Europe and the European Union (EU). European language policy over the past 40 years involves three differentiated periods.
- The first one spans from the late 1980s throughout the 1990s, when assessment was mainly seen as part of wider language education initiatives funded and developed by the Council of Europe and the EU. This period culminates in the early 2000s with the launch of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the establishment of the EU's goal of 'mother tongue + 2'.
- In 2001, the Council of Europe and the EU joined forces to celebrate for the first time the European Day of Languages (EDL), which has been celebrated annually ever since. This marked the beginning of more intense cooperation between these two institutions.
- The second period is marked by the need to measure progress in the development of language competences, with language assessment as the central instrument for policy making.
- Between 2008–2011, the European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC) was conducted to collect data towards the EU's indicator on language competences.
- The third period starts in late 2015, with the EU moving towards closer cooperation with Member States to promote integrated approaches to learning, teaching and assessment not only in education, but also across a variety of policy fields, such as employment or social integration.
- Rather than regularly repeating the ESLC, as initially planned, and given the difficulty of comparing results from national exams, in September 2015 the EU shifted the policy focus towards integrated approaches to learning, teaching and assessment.

Introduction

This paper looks at how the role of language assessment in European language policy has evolved over the past thirty years. In order to do this, it is helpful to identify three differentiated periods. The first one spans from the late 1980s throughout the 1990s, and culminates in the early 2000s with the launch of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the establishment of the EU's goal of 'mother tongue + 2'. The second period is marked by the need to measure progress in the development of language competences, with language assessment as the central instrument for policy making. The third period starts in late 2015, with the EU moving towards closer cooperation with Member States to promote integrated approaches to learning, teaching and assessment not only in education, but also across a variety of policy fields, such as employment or social integration.

European language policy over the past thirty years has been driven by two intergovernmental institutions: the Council of Europe and the European Union (EU). The Council of Europe promotes linguistic diversity and language learning as a way to achieve greater unity among European citizens. Holding an advisory and advocacy role to its 47 member states, the Council of Europe cannot intervene to shape national educational or language policies.

The European Union (EU) constitutes a political union of 28 Member States. However, education and language policies are not subject to EU legislation and remain the responsibility of national governments, according to the principle of subsidiarity. Therefore, the role of the EU in language education is simply to ensure cooperation among EU national authorities and the sharing of good practices which could be replicated in other contexts across the EU.

First period (1989–2002): Growing interest in measuring progress

Between 1989 and 2007 there were a number of socio-political developments in Europe which importantly influenced the shaping of language policies, such as the enlargement of the EU with its increasing diversity, the movement of people across and into the EU, and the need for policies better suited to address the challenges of globalization, mobility, employment and economic growth. Within this context, the EU had to consider the role that languages could play and how linguistic and cultural diversity could be maintained while at the same time promoting greater coherence and the setting of European standards and benchmarks. Although these issues had traditionally been addressed by the Council of Europe since the late 1940s, the new socio-economic situation required the EU to also investigate ways of working more closely with Member States.

Through their Socrates and Socrates II funding scheme, and particularly the Lingua programme, between 1989 and 2006 the EU provided significant funding to support projects promoting language education and multilingual communication. Some of these projects were closely related to language assessment, such as the DIALANG project, which developed diagnostic tests in several European languages, and ALTE's Item Writer Guidelines, Multilingual Glossary of Language Testing Terms, Content Analysis Checklists and, most importantly, the Framework for Critical Levels of Language Performance, which later fed into the Council of Europe's CEFR. During this period, initiatives to support language assessment were just part of broader priorities within language education and linguistic diversity, but were not intended to have a direct impact on national education systems.

On 25th September 2001 the EU and the Council of Europe joined efforts to celebrate the first European Day of Languages (EDL) event, which has been celebrated annually ever since. In that same year, the Council of Europe also launched the CEFR. The CEFR provides a meaningful framework for language learning, teaching and assessment, and constitutes the most important reference document for developing language policy in Europe, both within and outside national educational systems, as recognized by the

strong support that the EU has demonstrated towards this tool. This marked the beginning of a new period with more intense cooperation between these two institutions.

Building on all these developments, and within the frame of the Lisbon Strategy, which aimed for sustainable economic growth and social cohesion in the EU, the European Council met in Barcelona in 2002 and invited Member States ‘to improve the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age’ (European Council 2002: 19). Also known as the Barcelona goal of ‘mother tongue + 2’, this aspiration has led most of the EU-level and national policies aimed at promoting and monitoring the development of language competences across Member States.

Second period (2002–2015): Focus on measuring the outcomes of language learning across Europe

European Indicator on Language Competence

Besides the goal of ‘mother tongue + 2’, the 2002 European Council Barcelona Conclusions also asked for the establishment of an indicator of language competence by 2003, which would allow monitoring Europeans' progress in linguistic competences. In 2006, the creation of the European Indicator of Language Competence was approved by the European Parliament, and it was assumed that it would require the regular collection of reliable data to monitor progress in the development of language skills among EU citizens.

Up until that moment, two indicators had been used to monitor performance and progress in language learning in schools towards the Barcelona goal:

1. Number of pupils in lower/upper secondary education learning foreign languages.
2. Average number of foreign languages learned per pupil in upper secondary education.

While these two indicators were useful in encouraging school students to learn two or more languages besides their mother tongue, the data collected for these indicators by Eurostat could not shed any light into the level of proficiency achieved in these languages. In their 2004-2006 Action Plan to promote language learning and linguistic diversity, the European Commission elaborated on the Barcelona goal and highlighted the uneven spread of language skills across countries and social groups, the limited range of foreign languages spoken by EU citizens – mainly English, French, German and Spanish –, and reiterated the recommendation for all EU citizens to reach meaningful communicative competence in at least two languages in addition to their mother tongue.

Based on this elaboration of the Barcelona goal, in this same Action Plan the European Commission recognized that the European Indicator of Language Competence would have to reliably assess all four competences (reading, writing, listening and speaking) and record those skills on the scales of the CEFR (from A1 – beginner to C2 – proficiency). This called for new language tests which could be repeated regularly to monitor progress over the years.

In 2008, the SurveyLang consortium (led by Cambridge English Language Assessment and constituted mainly by members of the Association of Language Testers in Europe) was awarded a contract from the European Commission to develop and implement the first European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC). As the first of what was hoped to become a series of regular ESLCs, this project was considered an initial stage of the indicator which would serve to pilot the methodology and instruments before it was implemented more widely to all EU Member States. The tests measured the language skills of 15-year-old students from only 16 educational jurisdictions from 14 countries, and they only included listening, writing and reading skills. The results of the ESLC were presented in 2012, and showed that:

- results vary widely across educational systems;
- only a minority of European students achieved the level of independent user in the first foreign language;
- results are generally lower for second foreign language;
- English enjoys a special status as a language of international communication.

The results of the ESLC confirmed that EU Member States were still far from reaching the ‘mother tongue + 2’ goal, and reflected the wide diversity of approaches to language teaching and assessment across Europe. This diversity was one of the most important findings – policies for the promotion of multilingualism and language education would only be meaningful insofar as they addressed the complex social, political and cultural contexts within which language education takes place in each country.

European benchmark on languages

Building on the results of the European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC), the European Commission published their 2012 Rethinking Education Communication, where they suggested the creation of a European benchmark which would help monitor the development of language competences across the EU. The benchmark included the following two goals which would have to be met by 2020:

- at least 50% of 15 year-olds attain the level of independent user or above of a first foreign language;
- at least 75% of pupils in lower secondary education study at least two foreign languages besides their main language of instruction.

While the second indicator would be monitored using data collected by Eurostat, the first indicator would require regularly conducting an extended version of the ESLC, possibly including more Member States, languages and skills. Even if some Member States did not want to take part in the ESLC, these countries would still be able to contribute by providing results from national examinations, as long as they could prove that their exams were reliably aligned to the CEFR levels.

Council Conclusions on Multilingualism and the Development of Language Competences

In light of the results from the first ESLC, in 2014 the Council of the European Union agreed on the Conclusions on Multilingualism and the Development of Language Competences. Rather than endorsing the establishment of the European benchmark on languages, the Council invited the European Commission to assess the feasibility of using the results from national language examinations to monitor progress towards the ‘mother tongue +2’ goal, to collect data on the number of students at secondary education studying a third language, and to strengthen their cooperation with the Council of Europe’s ECML.

In 2015, the European Commission followed up on these Council Conclusions by launching three different short-term studies on language competences: an overview of national language tests across Europe (conducted by the European Commission’s Eurydice Network), an assessment of the comparability of the results from these national language tests (conducted by Cambridge English Language Assessment with the support of ALTE members), and an investigation of the relationships between language competences and employability across EU Member States (conducted by the Centre for Research on Education and Lifelong Learning – CRELL). Considering their focus on language assessment, the first two studies and their main findings are particularly important to understand the role that language testing has played in shaping European language policy over the past few years.

The Eurydice study aimed to offer a comprehensive overview of all national language tests across EU Member States, considering national tests as standardized tests normally developed and administered by the central/top level public authorities. The report included comparisons of exams based on a number of features, such as test purposes, student population tested (including educational level and grade) or language skills measured. The results confirmed the immense diversity existing across Europe regarding

language assessment systems and the embeddedness of teaching and assessment methods in the broader educational, cultural and socio-political contexts of the different countries.

The second study was seen both as a complement to the Eurydice report and as a way of assessing the feasibility of comparing data from national language exams. After reviewing 133 language examinations through a comparability framework especially designed for this study (which built considerably on the ALTE Content Analysis Checklists developed in the 1990s with Socrates funding), the authors concluded that the wide variety of formats in which results are being presented and the diversity in the purposes, measurement characteristics and interpretation of results across countries makes any meaningful comparison of results across Member States almost impossible.

Third period (2015 onwards): Supporting integrated learning, teaching and assessment approaches

The results from both the ESLC and the 2015 studies proved the multidimensional complexity of assessing language competences at EU level. Big surveys are expensive and often provide simplistic results which fail to reflect the many contextual factors within which these results need to be interpreted. National exams, on the other hand, are fully determined by national educational systems and socio-cultural contexts, but they are currently too different and their results are too difficult to compare. National exams also tend to focus on what can be easily tested (e.g. reading skills) rather than on the competences which seem to be required by the labour market (e.g. speaking skills). Furthermore, many EU Member States are already involved in other international surveys (e.g. Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), etc.), with the potential of further surveys straining the limited resources that educational authorities have at their disposal.

In view of these limitations, and in line with the 2014 Council Conclusions on Multilingualism and the Development of Language Competences, in September 2015 the European Commission turned away from standardized language testing, and instead encouraged localized actions adapted to each unique context to ensure the sustainable and effective improvement of Europeans' language skills. These measures include:

- facilitating opportunities for Member States to learn from each other and to adapt successful practices to their own contexts;
- increasing the offer and diversity of language learning opportunities across all Member States;
- modernizing current teaching and assessment systems to ensure learning outcomes are those required by our fast-changing, diverse and ever more globalized societies, addressing the needs of both local and European labour markets;
- empowering language teachers by modernizing the curricula, incorporating innovative pedagogical approaches, adapting initial and in-service training programmes, and implementing efficient measures of formative assessment throughout the educational system rather than focusing on summative assessment (i.e. exams) at the end of certain educational stages;
- promoting a more extensive and intensive use of the CEFR, not only as part of the assessment methods but also as the rationale behind any language education system in Europe;
- investing in the improvement of the Online Linguistic Support tool, which was designed to test students' language skills at the beginning and end of an Erasmus+ mobility grant, and also includes online language materials aimed at supporting the development of students' language skills while abroad.

Ultimately, all these measures reflect an important shift from measuring progress in language competences to facilitating the development of students' language-learning skills. While the Barcelona goal focused on teaching students at least two foreign languages, the new direction suggested by the EU is to encourage national education systems to develop students' ability to learn and communicate successfully in foreign

languages throughout their lives when and as required by their personal and professional circumstances. Both the EU and the Council of Europe no longer see languages solely as an educational matter, but rather

as a transversal skill with relevance to many objectives, such as social integration, employment, mobility or minority rights. As a consequence, funding mechanisms are turning again towards smaller projects that can have a deeper and more sustainable impact at a local level, as was already the case in the Socrates and Socrates II programmes between 1989 and 2006, rather than on large surveys to measure progress towards given indicators.

The world is indeed becoming increasingly globalized and fast-changing, and it is practically impossible to predict the needs of the future labour markets in which current students will need to integrate. The European Survey on Language Competences showed that language learning at school is not providing students with the language skills needed. The focus in most language education across European schools remains on aspects that are either too difficult or not useful, which negatively affects learners' motivation. Language lessons at schools do not usually allow enough practice time, which results in students' passive knowledge of the language rather than the communicative skills required by labour markets and super-diverse societies. The concept of linguistic repertoires is especially useful since it does not focus on mastering isolated languages, but rather on developing different levels of ability in a number of languages which are used in different spheres of life and for different purposes.

European policy makers should therefore adopt multilingualism agendas aimed at changing attitudes and behaviours towards language learning, and supporting a transformative shift which supports extending the reach of classrooms into wider society. Technology can be a great facilitator for this latter task, especially when the different tools (e.g., programmes, websites, apps, learning management systems) are properly structured and curated. Digital learning tools enable the breaking down of barriers between school and language learning, and have a unique potential to connect what happens in language classrooms with learners' everyday realities. In this context, language assessment can play an important role by facilitating learning more effectively, especially if it is appropriately built into the learning tools to monitor progression and to provide relevant and timely feedback. Language policies addressing these issues will not only promote more successful lifelong language learning, but they will also enable European citizens to fully benefit from the personal and professional opportunities that Europe has to offer.

Further reading

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