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Dealing with multilingual intercultural exchanges and migration in France and Europe

Abstract

The promotion of cultural and linguistic diversity is a major challenge in our societies, which are characterized by the globalization of exchanges, the increase in international mobility and unprecedented migratory movements in Europe but also by the impoverishment of linguistic heritage.

The question of languages and cultures is raised at both national and European levels since there is no cultural and linguistic policy that does not cross national, European and international approaches.

This paper consists of two parts. The first highlights the latest policy developments within the European Union regarding intercultural exchanges and multilingualism in the digital environment. The second focusses on the importance of language and knowledge of society for the integration of migrants and describes current practices in the EU and its member states.

1. Intercultural exchanges and pluri/multilingualism[1] in the digital environment – Recent policy developments within the European Union Council for Culture (*Claire-Lyse Chambron*)

1.1 The context for intercultural exchanges and pluri-/multilingualism in Europe

Laid down in the European Union Treaty,[2] cultural and linguistic diversity is a constituent element of European identity, just as culture and language are essential to each of our national identities. It contributes to the blossoming of creativity, creative freedom and intercultural exchanges. It promotes mutual understanding and respect for cultures and languages, and it is a shared heritage, a wealth, a strength and a distinctive characteristic of relations within Europe and with the rest of the world.

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[1]   Multilingualism is defined by Beacco and Byram (2007) by the presence or coexistence of several languages within a given society or territory or in a given medium. Plurilingualism is defined by the Council of Europe as the ability of an individual to use several languages.

[2]   https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6 da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF.

Apart from Brexit, the Covid-19 Pandemic, successive waves of migration against the backdrop of conflicts around the world, accelerating climate change and loss of biodiversity, as well as the digital transformation, have inevitably had an impact on the extent to which people are able to live, study and work in our countries and in other countries in Europe. Recently, the war in Ukraine – which has caused the largest displacement of citizens in Europe since the Second World War – also represents a very serious challenge in this regard.

That is why, for Europe, it is necessary to encourage integration, including teaching and learning, mobility and exchange among cultural organisations, educational institutions, artists and cultural professionals, researchers, teachers and students. It is equally necessary, through translation, to facilitate the circulation of cultural works, information, ideas and knowledge in Europe, in all of the languages of the EU.

However, the acceleration of digital uses may give rise to fears of a certain cultural and linguistic standardization, with the predominance of platforms and overseas tech giants (Big Tech), which raise the question of the accessibility or "discoverability" of multilingual content online. Digital technology can pose a risk to linguistic diversity and increase the pressure for a single language, easily understood by all. But the technology is also an asset for the preservation of linguistic heritage and for the circulation of works, information, ideas and knowledge.

1.2   Recent policy developments within the EU Council for culture concerning multilingualism

As part of the French Presidency of the EU in the first half of 2022, the General Delegation for the French language and the Languages of France of the Ministry of Culture organized the online forum "Innovation, Technologies and Plurilingualism" on 7-9 February, in which several EFNIL members participated.

Such a mobilization was in line with France's constant commitment to cultural and linguistic diversity in Europe. This forum was also a response to the request by the European Ministers of Culture, who had included the organization of such an event in the Work Plan for Culture 2019-2022. This event was to be accompanied by a strong political initiative so that the Member States and the European institutions would better promote multilingualism in the digital age as culture and language are essential vectors of social cohesion and integration within the European Union.

As a follow-up to the forum, *EU Council Conclusions on reinforcing intercultural exchanges through the mobility of artists and cultural professionals, and through multilingualism in the digital era*[3] were adopted on 4 April 2022 by the EU Council of Ministers for Culture in Luxembourg.

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3   https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022XG0413(02)&from =EN.

These conclusions are in line with the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019[4] on *a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages* and the Recommendation of the Council of Europe on *the importance of plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture*[5] of 2 February 2022; they also build on existing European programmes such as *Creative Europe, Erasmus+, Horizon Europe* and the *Digital Europe Programme.*

According to the Council Conclusions, **multilingualism and translation**, which are linked to issues of **intercultural exchanges, integration, social cohesion and European citizenship**, should be at the heart of EU policies, in a transversal way. Through **language technologies and artificial intelligence**, the availability of and access to multilingual European data[6] and resources have to be ensured in the digital environment, in particular on digital platforms. This represents a challenge for growth and democracy in Europe.

The EU and its Member States should take advantage of language technologies for:
–   the circulation of cultural works, ideas and knowledge and their accessibility on the internet by improving the discoverability of content,
–   the teaching of languages and lifelong learning,
–   supporting migrants' learning of their host country's official languages while valuing linguistic diversity,
–   facilitating the day-to-day lives of citizens,
–   the development of more inclusive societies, helping to strengthen democracy and citizens' sense of belonging to Europe.

The Member States and the European Commission are invited to take a more strategic and operational approach to multilingualism. Such an approach would be reflected in the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026 initiated by the Czech Presidency of the EU, including operational and policy initiatives that have a direct impact on the lives of citizens.

The role of EFNIL is highlighted in the Council conclusions, which call for:

> […] *a multilingual information space on European language technologies and related support and resources, including European schemes for plurilingualism and translation, in conjunction with bodies such as the European Federation of National Institutions for Language* (*EFNIL*).

This is an important step forward for EFNIL in terms of recognition and visibility in the EU!

We trust that these issues will continue to be carried forward by the current and subsequent EU presidencies.

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4   https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605(02).

5   https://www.ecml.at/Portals/1/documents/about-us/CM_Rec(2022)1E.pdf.

6   Cf. DG CONNECT initiatives on the European Data Space.

2.   Mastering the language of the host country: How does it work in France and in Europe? (*Claire Extramiana*)

Alongside the promotion of plurilingualism as an essential element, linguistic integration must be considered a crucial element of language policy.

As we know, the integration of migrants into a host country is the subject of political debate and policy initiatives in many European states. In this context, issues related to the acquisition of competences in the language(s) of the host country are particularly important, depending on the role and function of languages at national level. One assumption, however, cannot be false, which is that language **is the key for a new life in a new country**.

This is why, for the past two decades, a growing number of western European countries have introduced language and knowledge of society (KoS) requirements as part of their immigration and integration policies. Actually, the acquisition of competences in the language of the host country is considered in different ways:

– as a way to facilitate integration or
– as a way to reduce immigration, especially for poorly educated people, which seems to be the opposite of facilitating integration.

Whatever the aim of policies on a national level might be, most EU countries today have formal language and KoS requirements for citizenship, residency and/or prior to entry to the country.

2.1   How do European countries deal with language proficiency? An overview

Among various studies on this topic, the Council of Europe conducted several surveys between 2007 and 2018 (the author was involved in three of them in 2007, 2009 and 2013). Although the 2018 survey was carried out 5 years ago ("The 2018 Council of Europe and ALTE survey on language and knowledge of society policies for migrants"),[7] it is worth summarizing the main trends here, namely:

1) In 2018, only seven of the 40 member states of the Council of Europe surveyed had no language requirements prior to entry, for temporary or permanent residency or for citizenship.

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[7]   https://rm.coe.int/the-2018-council-of-europe-and-alte-survey-on-language-and-know ledge-o/16809c88f9.

2) Most states that set language and/or KoS requirements did so in relation to citizenship (78 %) or in relation to permanent residency (51 %). This was the case in France. Comparatively fewer countries reported requirements for temporary residency (32 %) or prior to entry (24 %).

3) The level of language proficiency required varied from one country to the next, as did the learning opportunities through tailored and free-of-charge language courses .

4) These language proficiency requirements were typically expressed in CEFR levels. Pre-entry requirements varied from no requirements to A2, temporary and permanent residency requirements from no requirements to B1. The most common levels were A1 and A2 for both. Citizenship requirements varied from no requirements to B2.

5) In nearly all of the states surveyed, language courses for migrants were provided and/or financed by the government and their quality was controlled. Half of the member states surveyed provided language courses completely free of charge for all migrants. One third provided free courses for groups of migrants. Most member states provided up to 250 hours, sometimes up to 500 hours and several provided more than 500 hours of language courses. More than 1,000 hours was an exception.

6) Low-literate learners were rarely provided with a sufficient number of hours of instruction to reach the language level required.

2.2 What does it look like today in France?

Since 2011, France has been one of the western European countries that made the learning of the national language compulsory for non-EU foreigners admitted to stay in France. Language training may be compulsory depending on the level of French. Language courses, even the optional ones, are free of charge.

The compulsory language courses that target the level A1 (oral and written) from the first year of residing in France last 100, 200 and 400 or 600 hours, the latter for people with little or no schooling in the country of origin or with little or no command of writing in their native language respectively. Level A2 (optional training of 100 hours) is required to apply for a residency permit valid for 10 years and level B1 (optional training of 100 hours) is necessary to apply for French citzenship.

As for young migrants (under the age of 16), i. e. newly arrived allophone pupils, they represent less than 1 % of the school population in mainland France and overseas. There are specific classes in the 1st year, with one additional school year for previously unschooled pupils. It is interesting to note that there are no statistics on the number of "migrant children" after this first schooling period.

2.3   Three challenges

As a ministerial department dealing with the issue of linguistic integration, the General Delegation for the French Language and the Languages of France has identified several challenges such as:

1) Supplying language courses responding to individual needs. The aim should be to design courses according to the learner's initial education level and learning aptitudes like in Denmark ten years ago (courses for learners with little previous schooling differ from courses for learners with more education). There is also an obvious need to continue attending language courses after mandatory provision or once the required proficiency language level is reached. This raises the issue of access to the job market, especially for women, and the opportunity to master the language for a better job.

2) A tailor-made supply of language courses for the job market. The diversity of professional context makes this difficult. Such language courses can only be offered by stakeholders on the job market, not by the agency working for the ministry in charge of designing policies. This issue is crucial in professional sectors such as construction, care and hospitals. It is worth mentioning the excellent project "Language for Work" run by the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML), which aims to support work-related language learning by migrants, refugees, and ethnic minorities. Resources are available on the ECML website.[8]

3) Taking other needs into account such as access to culture. Our department gives support to cultural institutions that provide cultural activities linked to the learning of the language. An evaluation of this programme revealed that culture as a means to fight against social isolation can improve motivation and provide opportunities to practise the language. In other words: participation in social and cultural life is the aim and empowerment is the means.

These challenges are also raised in the context of refugees, more specifically in the context of the war in Ukraine. Among the interesting responses to the Ukrainian crisis, it is worth mentioning the initiative of the French Ministry of Culture, which has helped provide Ukrainian refugees with language courses.[9] Referring to the Council of Europe, the project on the Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants (LIAM) has made it possible to develop a toolkit to support member states in their efforts to respond to the challenges posed by refugees.[10]

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[8]   https://languageforwork.ecml.at/Home/tabid/3151/language/en-GB/Default.aspx.

[9]   www.culture.gouv.fr/Aides-demarches/Appels-a-projets-partenaires/Urgence-Ukraine-2022 -dispositif-d-appui-aux-centres-labellises-Qualite-Francais-langue-etrangere.

[10]   www.coe.int/en/web/language-policy/adult-refugees.

In summary, the acquisition of the language of the host country remains key to a new life in a new country. The last few years have prompted us to make a nuanced assessment of the various measures taken by the public authorities, both political and technical. On a broad level, the requirements laid down in the law make it possible to set up training programmes without which language learning would be left to the sole initiative of migrants. The fact of offering these programmes funded by public authorities stems from the recognition of language as a key to integration, which in itself is quite positive.

What can pose a problem, however, is the quality of the training provided in terms of meeting the needs of learners. The challenges presented refer precisely to the needs as felt by the learners but also by the host society. Supplying language courses responding to needs, supplying tailor-made language courses for the job market and taking into account other needs such as access to culture are currently seen as priorities not only in France but also in many European countries.

3.   Concluding remarks

The conclusions of this paper can be formulated as follows: the promotion of pluri/multilingualism in the digital environment and the linguistic integration of migrants are currently crucial issues from the point of view of linguistic policies. These issues encompass both a national and European dimension. It is up to the Member States alongside the European Union to promote linguistic diversity and to respond to the challenges of the integration of migrants. This is how language management becomes more necessary than ever to ensure social cohesion in our societies.

References

Beacco, J.-C./Byram, M. (2007). *De la diversité linguistique à l'éducation plurilingue: Guide pour l'élaboration des politiques linguistiques éducatives en Europe*. Strasbourg: Conseil de l'Europe.