Tema

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Towards plurilingual approaches in learning and teaching languages

An impression from the ECML conference Languages for Social Cohesion[*]

The final conference of the European Centre for Modern Languages' second medium term programme offered a possibility to take stock of the results of all the projects and to discuss these with colleagues. A rich variety of materials, mostly available in English and in French, was presented. In this contribution I will try to point out some of the projects and show their particular value from my perspective as a teacher educator and as a member of the editorial team of the journal Babylonia.

Contribution to theory building

At the theoretical level, a project in which the theoretical underpinnings of the notion of plurilingual competence were further developed (the project FREPA, an instrument in support of plurilingual education) deserves mentioning. Materials from several countries and languages were analysed in order to arrive at a conceptual framework. It is a good example of how justice is being done to work carried out in different linguistic and cultural contexts to develop a conceptual framework for plurilingual competence. It will, however, be necessary to further clarify these notions and to illustrate them by developing more concrete materials. This will probably happen in the new ECML programme.

Teacher education

At the level of teacher education many materials were presented, among which the project CoCoCoP (Coherence of principles, Cohesion of competences). This publication is mainly meant for teacher education

and contains contributions made by teacher educators, who work in different contexts and made different choices as to what to include in their training programmes. The articles provide materials for discussion on theoretical issues and an attempt is made to bring these together in a coherent framework.

As a teacher trainer I am particularly interested in the student teacher portfolio, a tool for initial and continued teacher education but also a challenging document to be used by teacher educators to analyse their own teaching curriculum.

Likewise, the instruments for quality assurance are challenging and invite critical reflection on the organisation and content of teacher education curricula.

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Plurilingual approaches

An important point is the multilingual aspect present in most projects and publications. In the multilingual and multicultural societies teachers are increasingly asked to look beyond the borders of their own language. They are invited to assist learners in becoming plurilingual citizens and not only to teach English, French, Italian or any other language, but to be aware of the fact that the teacher should try to contribute to the development of the learner's plurilingual competence. Materials developed within the ECML projects are highly suitable for multilingual teacher education. All too often students are mainly focused on learning to teach the language(s) they studied at university. Through the use of the ECML materials student teachers will develop a better understanding of the work of their colleagues who are responsible for the other languages in the school curriculum. It is good to see that more and more projects now address language teachers and not teachers of individual languages.

Validating all languages

With the changing population in Europe, due to migration and globalisation, classrooms now often have students from very different language backgrounds. It is important to validate these languages, to become aware of the various linguistic and cultural backgrounds in the classrooms and to give the students the feeling that these languages also count. The European Language Portfolio is of course a valuable instrument to do this, but several publications address this issue of validating all languages in Europe.

An electronic platform like the one created in the GULLIVER project, which is also described in an article elsewhere in this issue, is important because a space was created for students to interact and communicate in several languages. English appeared to be the most widely used languages on the platform, but other languages were also used to communicate in a multilingual environment.

Dissemination

For an institution like the ECML, disseminating project results is of the utmost importance. Dissemination cannot only be a problem to be addressed towards the end of a project, but should be part of the project planning from its very start. Much attention has been given to dissemination activities in the various projects: local workshops to disseminate ideas, practical material for teacher education and concrete tools to assist teachers and teacher educators in their work, all available at the ECML-project websites.

Babylonia and the ECML

Babylonia and the ECML share the same interests in the promotion of plurilingualism and intercultural understanding, and innovative approaches to language teaching and learning. These areas were all addressed in the programme. The editorial team of Babylonia will take stock of the various project publications, involve project coordinators and group members for future thematic issues and invite them to act as guest editors and article writers. In this way the journal can make a contribution towards the dissemination of the work of the ECML.

Footnote

* This contribution will also appear in the proceedings of the conference Languages for Social Cohesion, Graz, September 2007.

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