



Multilingualism and Language Learning: Measurement and Good Practice

Proceedings of the Mercator conference in Ljouwert, The Netherlands on 10-11 May 2007

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Introduction

On the 10th and 11th of May 2007 Mercator Research Centre organised the conference ‘Multilingualism and Language Learning: Measurement and Good Practice’ in Ljouwert/ Leeuwarden, the Netherlands. At this conference the report “The Development of Minimum Standards on Language Education in Regional and Minority Languages” was presented and discussed. This report describes minimum conditions and minimum provisions required to establish minimum standards for language education in regional and minority languages (RMLs). The report was presented at the plenary meeting of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe (CLRAE) on the 30th of May. The outcomes of this conference were discussed at the meeting of the Cultural and Education Committee of the CLRAE on the 31st of May.

The conference was attended by about seventy people. The participants included policymakers, researchers and education professionals in the field of RMLs from Belgium, Estonia, France, Georgia, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, Moldova, the Netherlands, Romania, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. During the conference several plenary key note speeches were given and five themes were discussed during sessions in two smaller groups. The aim of those theme sessions was to get feedback on the report, particularly concerning the recommendations made. Furthermore, the theme sessions were meant to share knowledge regarding RML education in practice and to indicate successes and challenges in the field. Besides, an important element of the sessions was the identification of needs and wishes for further research and the possible role of Mercator Research Centre in that respect.

What follows is a summary of the outcomes of the theme sessions that focused on five themes: “Common goals and minimum standards”, “Levels of ratification in practice”, “Language acquisition in a multilingual context”, “Education models and the curriculum in the multilingual school”, and “Integrated language policy at school”. After that an overview is given of research issues that were identified during the theme sessions. Finally, a description will be given of possible tasks for Mercator Research Centre as brought forward by the conference participants.



Theme sessions

The discussions during the theme sessions yielded insight into important issues in the field of RML education. Each session was chaired by an expert on the theme and the discussions focused on a short list of questions. A single question was often enough to get the discussions going and resulted in a wealth of information, and often there was not enough time to deal with every question extensively. The discussions have provided valuable contributions to the setting of the agenda for the years to come, both in terms of common activities towards the improvement of education IN and OF regional and minority languages and in terms of setting the agenda for research projects.

Theme 1: Common goals and minimum standards

This session focused on the setting of core goals and the level of language command aimed at in RML education. Chairs were Bernadet de Jager (former researcher at Mercator Research Centre and co-author of the Minimum Standards Report) and Jan Oudeboon (Inspector of Frisian language Education).

The report recommends using the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, www.coe.int/portfolio) for RML education. At the session it was indicated that standards are important, since without goals you cannot take action. Linking minimum standards to the CEFR is a good idea. However, it is important to realise that RMLs also have cultural and historical aspects that should be included in education. Additionally, the CEFR is aimed at *foreign* language acquisition; maybe it can also be applied for first and second language acquisition. This could create more recognition for the CEFR and RMLs. In practice, implementation of the CEFR and the portfolio may be difficult; translation into practice and stimulating its use is not an easy task. The development of the CEFR and the actual application to a RML includes quite a lot of paperwork and extra conferment for schools and teachers. With regard to standards it was indicated that not only minimum standards should be identified but also optimum standards.

Several challenges and obstacles were identified regarding goals and standards in RML education. First of all, it is important that there is enough and adequate RML teacher training and that teaching materials are available and adequate; both areas should be developed further. Secondly, the defining of standards for RML education is a challenge as well as the defining of useful educational models. Furthermore, continuity of RML education between different school levels (e.g. from primary to secondary school) deserves attention. The financial aspect of RML education is seen as an obstacle as well. Besides, it would be useful if there was a research institute that focused on the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the implementation of the signed undertakings, in particular those from Article 8 Education.

An issue that was mentioned repeatedly during the conference was the general attitude towards RMLs and multilingualism; not just within RML communities, but especially at national level. Raising awareness of RMLs and the value of multilingualism can lead to more support for it. This can lead to an attitude shift in favour of multilingualism not only within the RML community but also at national level.

Regarding the setting of goals and standards the question was raised who has authority. Should the EU or the national governments set goals and standards, or the local authorities within the RML regions? The solution should be found in a combined top-down and bottom-up approach. This also holds for the awareness raising mentioned above: the



knowledge of the majority can be increased top down, at international and national level, and practical aspects of RML education can be dealt with at local level (bottom up).

The recommendations that are drafted in the report regarding educational goals are all deemed important, although recommendations 3 and 4 were considered most important.

- # 3 The Council of Europe should stimulate countries employing different educational models for teaching the minority language to relate language acquisition goals within each of these models to the different language acquisition levels listed in the CEFR.
- # 4 The Council of Europe should stimulate countries to set goals for language acquisition in the minority language as well as for teaching the history and culture of minority language speakers.

Recommendations 2 (The Council of Europe should stimulate countries to use the CEFR for the description of education goals in the minority language) and 5 (The Council of Europe should stimulate countries to integrate history and culture of the minority language speakers in the curriculum of all schools in the area where the minority language is spoken) could be extended to national level.

It should be remarked that there is not always a link between the recommendations and what is needed for survival of the language.

The recommendations regarding the inspectorate are all important too, although the first recommendation was regarded most important: the Council of Europe should stimulate countries to organise a supervisory body or to appoint special inspectors within a supervisory body who specifically monitor education in and through the minority language. This recommendation is imperative, whereas the other two recommendations determine the quality of the inspectorate. The establishing of a supervisory body is important, however there are several aspects that need to be dealt with: Should the inspectorate be independent? Who trains the inspectors? What are the necessary skills? The recommendations cannot be too specific regarding those issues; the Charter gives the states a choice and the situations in the countries involved are very different from each other.

Concerning the implementation of the recommendations national, regional and local governments might have different interests. The Council of Europe is based on nation states, whereas RMLs are obviously tied to specific regions within one or more states. It is a challenge that not all national or local officials have relevant knowledge; they ought to be trained so that ratifications of national governments can be made to work at regional and local level.

Many suggestions for further research and the role of Mercator Research Centre were brought forward by the participants in the discussion groups in relation to theme 1. The following issues were put forward as suggestions:

Research regarding the use of RML and its added value

- make an inventory of research (being) done on RML education
- investigate the importance of RML for the economy. What is the unique selling point of multilingualism? How can it be promoted?
- investigate the economic value of the RML if it is the national language across the border
- research into what children do when they leave (RML) school and why they do it; do they go on speaking the RML or not? Why do they switch to the national language?
- a lot of research on RML is quantitative; it would be good to have a qualitative research design or action design

Research regarding practical aspects of RML



- help regional authorities and schools translate the recommendations to local levels
- find ways to give more information to non-RML/majority language speakers about the value of multilingualism
- what are the minimum goals for RML education in order for the RML to survive?
- research into the use of CEFR ('good practice')
- how easily does CEFR link to RMLs?
- make teaching materials and resources more easily available and accessible for different RML regions (e.g. web based)

Specific tasks for Mercator in addition to the suggested research topics

- extend the scope towards new member states of the EU (and beyond)
- write more regional dossiers, also/especially on 'smaller' RMLs, which in most cases are endangered. This could give them an impetus. Mercator can make people more aware of those smaller languages.

Theme 2: Levels of ratification in practice

The chairs of this session were Alistair Walker (Nordfriesische Wörterbuchstelle) and Catharine Redknap (Welsh Language Board).

Article 8 of the Charter can be ratified at different levels that vary depending on the extent to which education in the RML is provided. Level ii and iii in particular give rise to different interpretations. The second level is formulated as follows: "to make available a substantial part of education in the relevant regional or minority languages", and the third level is: "to provide, within education, for the teaching of the relevant regional or minority languages as an integral part of the curriculum".

Trilingual education as it is provided in Fryslân and multilingual education in Catalonia, the Basque Country and at the Risumskole in Northern Germany are all regarded as good examples of level ii or iii. Bilingual education where the regional language is not one of the two languages is a bad example.

It is stressed that apart from the teaching OF the RML, teaching IN the RML is vital. Furthermore, children should be presented with language in a meaningful context and their language experience ought to be balanced: they should experience the RML both in school and in the community. The attitude of the principal and the staff is also very important; they can make or break bilingual education.

Factors that negatively affect bilingual education are a lack of political support, non-standardisation of the RML, and lack of compatibility of first and second language learners. Additionally, the absence of bilingual preschool education can hinder the development of bilingualism.

In the report ten recommendations regarding educational models are made. Recommendation 3 and 5 were considered most important.

- # 3 States Parties should describe the amount of time the minority language is taught or used as the language of instruction within the different models of minority language education.
- # 5 The Council of Europe should stimulate countries that ratify the European Charter to ensure that schools provide insight for parents concerning the educational models for minority language instruction.

Recommendations 8 and 9 were also considered important.

- # 8 The Council of Europe should stimulate countries that ratify the Charter at level i and level ii to provide all pupils in the area of the minority language with some basic



instruction in the minority language and in the history and culture of the minority speakers.

- # 9 The Council of Europe should stimulate countries to guarantee longitudinality in the provision of minority language education in pre-primary, primary and secondary education.

The report also makes recommendations with regard to teacher training. All recommendations are deemed important but recommendations 1, 3 and 4 are considered most important.

- # 1 The Council of Europe should stimulate countries to provide enough teachers for the teaching of minority languages.
- # 3 The Council of Europe should stimulate countries to provide high-quality initial teacher training focused both on didactics of high-quality teaching in a multilingual setting and on language proficiency in the minority language.
- # 4 The Council of Europe should stimulate countries to provide for further teacher training courses focused on bringing knowledge and skills related to didactics of high-quality teaching in a multilingual setting up-to-date.

An issue related to teacher training is the question which is more important: didactical skills or language command? Attitude and enthusiasm are still more crucial, and it could be an idea to address those elements in teacher training.

Several research issues were brought forward by the participants in relation to theme 2:

Teacher training and qualification

- determine the minimum tools to give a helping hand to teachers that are not fully qualified
- research into continuing teacher training
- regarding the 3rd recommendation on teacher training: research at European level

RML educational practice

- make an inventory of best practice (Linguámon is already working on that)
- evaluate the different models of bilingual education (different language per teacher/(part of the)day/subject/ etc.) and indicate which models are used most.
- investigate the level of attainment in all subjects in all models of provision (comparative research)
- study the ‘compatibility’ of first and second language learners
- Mercator’s Network of Schools can be useful when it comes to looking at RML education in practice

Theme 3: Language acquisition in a multilingual context

In this theme session the early introduction of bilingualism was discussed. Chairs were Boyd Robertson (University of Strathclyde) and Sytske de Boer (SFBO – Centre for Frisian medium daycare).

Several instances were found of successful examples of early bilingualism. First of all, the Frisian “Tomke” project was mentioned; within this project information for future parents is provided. In Fryslân there is also an external evaluation committee for Frisian medium preschools that by asking questions helps the preschools reflect on their practice. Within preschools teacher qualifications as such are not seen as very important; teachers get enough support from the materials. Secondly, the situation in Wales was referred to as a good example. In (South) Wales future parents get an information package on early transmission



and bilingualism before their child is born. Furthermore, Scots Gaelic was mentioned as a good example, as well as immersion in general. Another interesting, slightly different example comes from Catalonia. Multilingual immigrants that arrive there understand the advantages of bilingualism. All information provided by schools is in Catalan, and because the immigrants do not speak Catalan a mediator is available to help them. This mediator proved to be valuable for Spanish-speaking parents too. Finally, in Romania a link between home and school is made; parents who do not speak the Armân language can join their children's Armân classes (that are provided outside the curriculum).

Within the field of early bilingualism there are also several challenges and pitfalls. First, the prejudice that parents sometimes have that RML education affects the acquisition of the other/national language should be addressed. This means that it is important to provide parents, teachers and others involved with adequate information on bilingualism and RML education. A related issue is the question of how this provision of information should be structured and organised.

Second, teacher skills are important and can form a challenge. A problem in this area is that preschools are often organised differently from schools; there is no 'curriculum' and the supervisors are not called 'teachers'. Additionally, preschools can be provided by the public, private and voluntary sector, and you cannot demand teacher qualifications in each sector. In short, it is difficult to set minimum qualifications within preschool education. Apart from teacher qualifications, lack of confidence and collaboration are also problems in this area; there is a need for an attitudinal change. Another issue is the need for adequate materials.

Moreover, the location of the pre-primary school plays a role in the success of early bilingualism. It is necessary that there is a language policy within the community and that the RML is spoken within the community. Children and parents should not just be confronted with the RML in school, but also outside the school: for instance, health care specialists should also use the RML.

An important aspect in RML education is continuity from one level to another; this includes continuity from preschool to primary school. Successful examples of such continuity can be found in Wales, Scotland, Ireland and the Basque country.

In relation to continuity several remarks were made. First of all, the need for a better understanding of continuity and its effects was expressed. Second, co-location of pre-primary and primary school contributes to continuity. A clear link between methods used at different levels also contributes to continuity. Furthermore, it was indicated that portfolios can be useful in that they give information to schools about what a child has done and learnt at the previous school; this gives the school insight into the competences of the new students and their differences.

Finally, an aspect that hinders continuity is the overlap between the regulating bodies concerned. Parental pressure on schools can both have a negative and a positive influence.

The last part of the theme sessions 3 were aimed at identifying research issues; this resulted in the following list:

Research specifically related to preschool education

- make an inventory of bilingual preschool provisions/situations in Europe (update PREP)
- investigate the preschool attitude of parents regarding bilingualism
- investigate current practices (diversity)

General research issues:

- research into continuity and its effects



- further investigate the effects of trilingual schools (does the third language affect normalisation of the RML; when is the third language best added)
- investigate language use outside the classroom; what are the reasons and mechanisms of code switching when pupils are outside the school? (a 50-50 division in education might seem fair, but a language switch outside the school actually means another division). Is age a factor?
- do research on how RML education can be started in areas where it does not exist yet and give examples of best practices
- investigate activities outside the school that can contribute to RML acquisition
- to what extent can a school be organised multilingually (apart from the actual lessons: e.g. are teacher meetings also bilingual)
- study the effectiveness of bilingual schools (also in monolingual communities)
- investigate topics for certification (what aspects should be included in teacher training)
- can a solution be found for the problem of parents of children at a RML school who cannot speak the RML themselves and cannot help their children with their homework

Specific tasks for Mercator in addition to the suggested research topics

- dissemination of successful projects
- information role towards governments: to make national and regional governments aware of the importance of good bilingual preschools

Theme 4 Education Models and the Curriculum in the Multilingual School

Theme 4 concerned the models for bilingual/ trilingual schools and the continuity of language learning throughout the whole school period. Chairs were Sikko de Jong (Organisation for Frisian pre-school provisions) and Maite Puigdeval Serralvo (Mercator Linguistic Rights and Legislation).

The educational model should contain common objectives and individual strategies, giving schools flexibility to act depending on the local situation. This should, in turn, be checked by the inspectorate. Furthermore, it was mentioned that language and pedagogy should be integrated. The general attitude towards trilingualism of the majority language speakers is important. The introduction of a third language as a medium of instruction could make RML education more attractive. One of the main issues in that respect is informing the parents well. A possible obstacle is the (re)training of teachers. Moreover, culture and history are considered important aspects of the educational model.

Measures to be taken by government parties are to set clear goals and models (with minimal, idealistic, or realistic standards). Providing access to infrastructure, new technologies, outside-school provisions, and the promotion of the language were mentioned as well. Giving an official status to a RML can have economic value and provide the RML-speaking communities with leverage for lobbying. Another role for government parties is the awareness raising of non-RML speakers and to have a language policy at both the national level and the local level, preferably by one single body.

Measures to be taken in terms of teaching materials and teacher training are teacher qualification, the (international) exchange of materials, the development and use of up-to-date materials using new technologies, and the linking of methods and materials for primary and secondary education. The use of the RML as a language of instruction for subjects like mathematics was mentioned here. Other topics that were covered are incentives for teachers, RML certification for teachers, and provisions outside the school to improve the quality of the teachers and create 'ambassadors' for the RML within communities. The Council of Europe



should stimulate the national governments to take measures relating to those aspects. The CEFR can be useful here.

Suggestions made by the participants for further research relating to theme 4 and tasks for Mercator in that respect are to:

- provide
 - guidelines to develop materials
 - databases
 - a European Network of Schools
 - an inventory of what is happening throughout Europe in the field of RML education
- look deeper into
 - the role of the media
 - the effectiveness of teacher training
 - the use of new technologies
 - ways to train RML teachers
 - ways to include non-school situations
 - ways to turn knowledge into use
 - ways to help small (often endangered) RMLs to get started with bilingual education
 - the gap between top-down and bottom-up approaches
 - the step between primary to secondary education, which is a bottleneck
 - the normalisation of the minority language and culture – ways for creating an equal status (also outside schools)
- disseminate
 - statistics
 - examples of ‘good practice’; prevent teachers from re-inventing the wheel over and over again.

Theme 5 Integrated Language Policy at School

In theme 5 integrated language policy was discussed, chaired by Siem Akkerman (Province of Fryslân) and Albert Walsweer (Educatief Centrum Noord en Oost, ECNO).

Integrated language policy means that there should be a coherent but flexible policy. This asks for a common (legal) framework at national level with different goals and levels of attainment at school level and an inspectorate. This leaves the actual specification of the policy to the discretion of the local authorities and individual schools.

The use of the RML outside the school is very important because popular culture has a strong influence through peer groups. The translation of Harry Potter into the RML was mentioned as an example.

The RML policy should be sequential and cumulative to ensure continuity. It should encompass the informing and advising of schools about multilingualism.

All this asks for a long-term philosophy at all levels.

With regard to the recommendations concerning the legal position priority was given to the following recommendations:

- #2 The Council of Europe should stimulate the countries to legally prescribe minimum standards for lessons in the minority language and a minimum number of teaching hours.



- # 3 The Council of Europe should stimulate countries to legally guarantee continuity in teaching the minority language at least during compulsory education.
- # 4 The Council of Europe should stimulate countries to guarantee a transparent division of responsibilities concerning minority language education between the central, the provincial and the local authorities.
- For RMLs that have not yet been recognised recommendation # 1 is the most important: The Council of Europe should stimulate countries to legally describe the parental right to opt for education in the minority language (as a subject and as a language of instruction) within the area where the minority language is spoken and the minimum number of pupils required for organising such education.

Research projects needed to improve integrated language policy are a comparative study of best practices and effectiveness, research into the definition of Integrated Language Policy at different levels (policy-makers/education authorities/municipalities/schools) and research into language acquisition. Other issues that ought to be addressed are the better understanding of the order of language acquisition, the transfer of languages, the effectiveness of policies, the effect of legislation on the quality of teaching, and an investigation of the possibilities offered by new technologies. Besides, ways of improving the image of RML and methods of raising awareness need to be investigated.

Suggestions made by participants for further development of the trilingual school concern the field of teacher training, teacher qualification and materials. Trilingual education should be better defined. It is unclear whether all three languages should be the medium of instruction. The best age for acquiring a third language needs further study. Another issue that needs to be addressed is the promotion of trilingual education and the awareness of it.

Suggestions for further research and tasks for Mercator were also given by the participants for Theme 5.

- Mercator Research Centre could expand the Eurobarometer of European Languages with RMLs and thus mainstream them with the state/official languages.
- the parents' perception of the 'limitations' of the school/ role of the school is an issue to be worked on in order to enable parents to make a well-informed choice. A related issue mentioned was marketing. Parents should be better informed to improve their attitude towards multilingualism. Mercator could be an (academic) channel towards governmental bodies.
- The use of the RML in popular (youth) culture was mentioned as an issue for study. The publishing of Harry Potter in the RML was suggested.
- How can the teaching of culture and history be part of the Lifelong Learning Programme?
- The use of oral history projects in RML education can be investigated.
- European project on 3rd language within trilingual education
- If different countries have the same minority language materials can be shared.
- When does the acquisition of the 3rd language start?
- there is a need for a group of experts to gather 'good practices', come up with their own research and advise teachers. Mercator should organise a conference on trilingual education (RML) and then form an expert group that brings forward proposals, ideas and evaluations.

Recurring issues



During the conference several issues were referred to more than once; they play an important role in RML education. Those issues are listed below.

- the importance of teaching materials
- teacher training and teacher qualification
- continuity between pre-primary, primary and secondary schools
- the difference between “large” and “small” (often endangered) RMLs
- the importance of awareness raising (dissemination of information and knowledge on multilingualism)
- dissemination of successful projects and good practices
- the need for an improvement of the attitude towards bilingualism/ multilingualism (not only within the RML area but also on a national scale)
- a role for Mercator as a link between the experts involved and policymakers and politicians

Mercator – Charting the Future

The results of the conference clearly show a need for further and extended research as well as for new research, as described in the chapter on the theme sessions. Not only has this conference given the experts attending the conference new insights, but it also gave a fresh impetus to further thought and the application of research results. In terms of setting the agenda for the new Mercator European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning (formerly Mercator Education) the conference has been very fruitful. Some of the many suggestions made by the participants can be covered by Mercator Research Centre. The proceedings will be used as input for a business plan being developed by Mercator for the years 2008-2013. This business plan will outline the mission, the activities, and the means for the Mercator European Research Centre.

Fields of interests stressed by the participants were:

- trilingual education
- language awareness raising (‘informed choice’)
- language transmission in families and communities
- continuity of language learning
- inventory of ‘good practices’

Other proposed fields concern curriculum development, the continuity of teaching and learning, language proficiency testing, the application of the CEFR, as well as didactic projects concerning teacher training methods, the setting and evaluation of common goals, and the differentiation in targets and methods of teaching and learning.

We would like to thank all participants for their valuable contributions to this conference. We are looking forward to future cooperation with partner institutions for the further development of the issues identified for research and educational practice.