

Brussels, 8 December 2003

OPINION

of the
Committee of the Regions
of
20 November 2003

on the

Communication from the Commission on Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004-2006

COM(2003) 449 final

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

Having regard to the European Commission Communication on Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004-2006 (COM(2003) 449 final);

Having regard to the letter of the European Commission of 24 July 2003 to consult it on this subject, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

Having regard to the decision of its Bureau of 1 July 2003 to instruct its Commission for Culture and Education to draw up an opinion on this subject;

Having regard to the Commission Staff Working Paper: Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity – Consultation (SEC(2002) 1234);

Having regard to the report from the Commission to the Council - The Concrete Future Objectives of Education Systems (COM(2001) 59 final) and the detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe;

Having regard to its opinion on the Report from the Commission to the Council - The Concrete Future Objectives of Education Systems (CdR 89/2001 fin)¹;

Having regard to its opinion on the Promotion and Protection of Regional and Minority Languages (CdR 86/2001 fin)²;

Having regard to its opinion on the European Year of Languages 2001 (CdR 465/99 fin)³;

Having regard to the Resolution of the Council of Education and Youth Affairs of 14 February 2002 on the promotion of linguistic diversity and language learning in the framework of the implementation of the objectives of the European Year of Languages 2001;

Having regard to its draft opinion CdR 248/2003 rev. 1 adopted on 2 October 2003 by the Commission for Culture and Education (Rapporteur: **Mrs Annette McNamara**, Member of Cork County Council and the South West Regional Authority (IE/EA));

Whereas:

1) a truly European Union of citizens and peoples starts by mutual understanding, in a broad sense, which includes the ability to communicate with our neighbours;

2) Member States have agreed common objectives under their work on Concrete Objectives for Education and Training Systems and have identified the improvement of language skills as a priority;

3) knowledge of languages is a prerequisite for professional, educational, cultural and personal mobility and a highly competitive European economy requires a workforce with a command of a range of language skills;

4) improving and facilitating language learning requires experienced and innovative language teacher training and new pedagogical methodology;

unanimously adopted the following opinion at its 52nd plenary session, held on 19-20 November 2003 (meeting of 20 November).

1. The Committee of the Regions' views

General Views

The Committee of the Regions

1. **welcomes** the Action Plan as an extremely positive contribution to the promotion of language learning and linguistic diversity and supports its objectives of (1) promoting lifelong language learning for all citizens from an early age; (2) increasing the quality of language teaching; and (3) creating a more language-friendly environment within the European Union;
2. **welcomes** the approach the Commission has adopted in making this Action Plan, by building on the experiences and evaluations of the European Year of Languages in 2001 and also by conducting an extensive process of consultation in the preparation of the Plan;
3. **considers** that the objectives of the Action Plan are ambitious, but necessary, and believes that their realisation will require a high commitment from all, especially the Member States;
4. **accepts** that this Action Plan complements actions taken by the Member States and local and regional authorities and will be implemented based on resources available under current European programmes. However, the Committee feels that for such an important objective the resources available are not sufficient;
5. **considers** that the terms "*multilingualism*" and "*multiculturalism*", which are used throughout the Action Plan should be replaced by the terms "*plurilingualism*" and "*pluriculturalism*" as these better reflect the objectives of the Action Plan as they describe an accumulation of communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and within which languages interrelate and interact;
6. **agrees** that care should be taken to favour the learning of a wide variety of languages and cautions against supporting the emergence of a de facto lingua franca;
7. **welcomes** the recognition in the Action Plan of the range of additional benefits associated with language learning, which include cognitive and mother-tongue skills. However, transferable skills that can be developed, such as communication, presentation, reporting, analytical and problem-solving abilities, also need to be highlighted. These skills play important roles in developing an entrepreneurial nature, thus contributing to the Lisbon agenda of the EU becoming "the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world";
8. **welcomes** the emphasis placed in the Action Plan on "*effective communicative ability*" as opposed to "*native speaker competence*", as this is a fairer reflection of the reality of the language learning process. However, the Committee considers that the implication in the Action Plan that active skills are superior to passive knowledge may not always be accurate and would prefer that the emphasis placed on "*partial competencies*" in the initial Staff Working Paper be given similar profile in the Action Plan;
9. is of the view that the Action Plan places considerable emphasis on the acquisition of foreign languages in comparison to consideration of those acquiring second languages. Given the increasing levels of migration, both to

and within the European Union, the Committee considers that the acquisition of second languages in all age-groups is increasingly important in order to ensure effective integration of migrant groups in the host country.

Regional Disparities in Language Skills

The Committee of the Regions

10. **notes** that in the proposed Action Plan the European Commission accepts that not all of the Plan's objectives can be achieved in all Member States and within the timeframe set out. The Committee feels that this may widen the gap in language skills between regions within the European Union;
11. is therefore, concerned that the Action Plan contains no proposals to address the obvious regional disparities in language skills, as identified by Eurobarometer in 2001 and considers that the regional aspects of language learning and language skills should be given greater emphasis in the Action Plan, considering the regional variations in language learning and language skills;
12. as a result, **supports** the idea of Member States conducting a language audit to help in identifying needs, formulating language-education policies and addressing disparities in language skills.

Action for Language Learning

The Committee of the Regions

13. **considers** that the European Language Portfolio (ELP) is a useful tool in language learning as (1) it encourages language learners to record and value each language they speak regardless of proficiency levels; (2) it encourages learners to record time spent abroad learning to present a more complete profile; (3) it promotes the development of language-learning strategies by means of checklists; (4) it allows learners to present their work to employers and directors of courses of study; and (5) it facilitates the tailoring of courses to the needs and goals of the learner. The Committee therefore believes that the ELP has the potential to transform language teaching within the Union and that it deserves greater emphasis in the Action Plan;
14. **welcomes** the recommendation that Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) be extended, especially to interdisciplinary degrees at University level which include a foreign language component, but is also aware that this may place additional demands on learners;
15. **supports** the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF) and considers that this should be given greater emphasis in the Action Plan, as it creates a framework within which national examinations and qualifications could be placed. In this regard it welcomes the

proposed working conference to devise mechanisms to support use of the CEF in language testing and certification;

16. **believes** that classes consisting of pupils from a range of backgrounds provide a rich backdrop against which tolerance, openness and intercultural competencies can be developed. In order to ensure this occurs the Committee considers that teacher-training programmes in all Member States should include an element of intercultural studies;
17. **believes** that early language learning is a firm basis for future language competency and would encourage support for language-learning programmes aimed at primary schools, such as *The Modern Languages in Primary School Initiative* in Ireland. Such programmes should be expanded to include a greater number of schools and languages, including the teaching of official national languages as second languages.

Existing European Programmes

The Committee of the Regions

18. **considers** that the Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci programmes contribute enormously to enhancing teacher training, improving language skills and promoting language learning. However, the Committee believes that there is a need to increase awareness and simplify the application procedures of many of the language-learning components of these programmes, as this will increase the take-up of these language-learning measures, which have to date been under-subscribed;
19. **supports** increased contact between Erasmus and "local" students and would support action by host institutions to encourage Erasmus students to give conversation and culture classes in local schools/community centres or at institutions in which they are enrolled;
20. **welcomes** the proposal to promote the participation of Erasmus students in language courses in less widely used and less taught languages of the countries participating in Socrates;
21. **welcomes** the recognition in the Action Plan of the role that town-twinning schemes can play, in the understanding of other cultures and in promoting language learning at the local level, by including multilingualism in future calls for proposals under the Town-twinning programme.

Linguistic Diversity

The Committee of the Regions

22. **accepts** that language learning and linguistic diversity are issues that can be addressed in very different ways at different levels and recognises that local and regional authorities have significant roles to play in this regard;
23. **welcomes** the encouragement in the Action Plan for national and sub-national authorities to promote linguistic diversity by actively encouraging the teaching and learning of the widest possible range of languages, including regional, minority, migrant community and sign languages;
24. **notes** that, while the mainstream European education, training and culture programmes are accessible to speakers of all languages, this may not be enough for some language categories. The Committee considers that special attention is required to assist the promotion of regional and minority languages, in line with the European Charter on Regional and Minority Languages.

2. The Committee of the Regions' recommendations

The Committee of the Regions

1. **calls** on the Commission to replace the terms *multilingualism* and *multiculturalism*, which are used throughout the Action Plan, with the terms *plurilingualism* and *pluriculturalism* as these better reflect the objectives of the Action Plan;
2. **recommends** that the Action Plan provide for a better dissemination of information on the fact that transferable skills are associated with language learning;
3. **proposes** that the Action Plan better recognise the value of *partial competencies* in learning foreign languages.

Regional Disparities in Language Skills

The Committee of the Regions

4. **calls** on the Member States to act on the recommendation of the Council of Europe to its Member States to conduct a language audit with a view to identifying needs and formulating appropriate language-education policies;
5. **calls** on the Action Plan to establish criteria to enable Member States to conduct an audit of language skills in order to identify regions of disadvantage, with a view to implementing targeted measures to address such imbalances across the European Union.

Action for Language Learning

The Committee of the Regions

6. **recommends** that Member States, in conjunction with local and regional authorities, further develop and increase their use of the European Language Portfolio (ELP) at all levels, from primary pupils to adult learners;
7. **considers** that if the application of CLIL is to be extended then the necessary supports for learners, such as small-group tuition and team teaching in schools, be provided;
8. **calls** on the proposed working conference on the use of the CEF (under Action II.6.4) to establish an agreed mechanism whereby the CEF can be consistently applied in all Member States to help determine standards of qualifications and certification of language courses, in order to increase the transparency of qualifications and, as a result, the mobility of workers and students;
9. **supports** the teaching of national languages and regional languages that are recognised as official languages within the Member State, as foreign languages, to migrant groups of all ages to ensure better integration into host communities and would urge that the Action Plan support training, best practice identification and dissemination in this area and other actions to ensure that the skills required to provide such teaching are available in all Member States;
10. **calls** on those responsible for teacher training programmes in all Member States to include an element of intercultural studies in all such programmes, and not just for language teacher-training courses.

Existing European Programmes

The Committee of the Regions

11. **calls** on the European Commission to simplify application procedures for language learning supports under the Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci programmes and similarly calls on the responsible national agencies to increase these programme's profile and generate awareness, to ensure greater take-up of the language-learning elements of the programmes;
12. **calls** for examples of best practices to be drawn-up and disseminated on how to improve the integration and inter-linkages of students on exchange programmes and local students and their communities;
13. **calls** on the Commission and national agencies to also work closely with local and regional authorities, as well as universities, in areas where less widely used and less taught languages are spoken, to encourage more Erasmus students to take courses in these languages before starting their Erasmus exchange;
14. **asks** that as part of the multilingual aspect of future Town-twinning, calls for proposals that emphasis is also placed on e-twinning of schools, to build pedagogical partnerships between schools, foster language learning and intercultural dialogue and promote awareness of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism within society.

Linguistic Diversity

The Committee of the Regions

15. **proposes** the establishment of a multi-annual programme for language learning and linguistic diversity, building on the success of the European Year of Languages in 2001 and the experiences of the Action Plan – with an appropriate share of the available resources reserved for the promotion of regional and minority languages – to support actions relating to the creation of a climate of acceptance of plurilingualism, exchange of experiences and highlighting the benefits of language learning;
16. **supports** proposals currently before the European Parliament for the establishment of a European Agency on Linguistic Diversity and Language Learning, to monitor the implementation of this Action Plan, to promote a plurilingual Europe and a language-friendly environment.

Follow-Up Actions

The Committee of the Regions

17. **considers** that, in the absence of a European Agency on Linguistic Diversity and Language Learning, the proposal for a permanent high-level group of representatives to assist in monitoring the implementation of the Action Plan is a good one. The Committee considers that this high-level group could also act as a forum for discussion on developments in language-learning policy and further suggests that it be represented on this group, given the contribution that local and regional authorities can make to the realisation of the objectives of the Action Plan and the development of policy in this area.

Brussels, 20 November 2003

The President
of the
Committee of the Regions

The Acting Secretary-General
of the
Committee of the Regions

Albert Bore

Gerhard Stahl

¹ OJ C 19, 22.1.2002, p.23

² OJ C 357, 14.12.2001, p.33

³ OJ C 156, 6.6.2000, p.33

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