

COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES

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Communication from the Commission

"TEACHING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES"

A. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

1. It should be recalled that, in addition to its nine official languages, the Community also has a further two national languages - Irish Gaelic and Luxembourgish - as well as a number of regional languages, which are currently spoken by about 50 million people.
2. It is clear that a knowledge of several Community languages by as many citizens as possible is bound to contribute mightily to the economic, technical, scientific and cultural development of the Community and thus to its internal cohesion, while respecting the cultural identity of all.

The freedom of persons, goods, capital and services - a prime objective of the Treaty of Rome, the Single European Act and the completion of a single European market in 1992 - will certainly be much easier to achieve if the teaching of modern languages is intensified in the years to come.

3. The right of every European to take up an occupation anywhere in the Community will remain an illusion until such time as citizens have knowledge of languages other than their mother tongue.

Few dentists (300 per year), doctors (1500 per year) or members of other professions have as yet taken advantage of existing provisions to establish themselves in another Community country.

Still too few students make study visits in another Community country (0.5 %). The ERASMUS and COMETT programmes, despite their success, affect only a small percentage of European students.

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4. Education authorities and pupils' parents should realise that adequate teaching of modern languages could considerably improve pupils' opportunities, especially in the case of disadvantaged pupils. The - non widespread - absence or decline in the teaching of foreign languages in technical and vocational training establishments is thus inconsistent with an equal opportunities policy.

B. UNCERTAIN POSITION OF LANGUAGE TEACHING IN THE COMMUNITY

In most Member States the position as regards the teaching and learning of modern languages is alarming.

1. From the point of view of quantity, the availability of modern language teaching is inadequate at primary level, in some areas of secondary education and in higher education.

The inadequacy concerns both budget resources and the availability of qualified teachers.

2. As regards quality, compared with the requirements of transnational communication for scientific and business purposes, it can be seen that :

- some school curricula do not make adequate provision for teaching languages;
- the training of language teachers is inappropriate;
- educational approaches are not well suited to the needs of the citizen, especially in the less widely taught languages;
- there is a lack of teaching material suited to the needs of the Europe of tomorrow;
- teachers show a lack of communicating and socio-cultural skills when called on to exchange ideas and concepts and negotiate with foreign establishments;
- there is a lack of understanding of the education systems of other countries, the place of modern languages in these systems, and current teaching traditions;
- cooperation between education systems regarding exchanges between teachers (of languages or other subjects) and exchanges between pupils is inadequate.

C. GUIDELINES FOR A COMMUNITY PROGRAMME

(a) Community institutions' position on the teaching of modern languages

Since 1976 the Council and the Ministers for Education meeting within the Council have included the teaching of modern languages in the action programme on education.

The conclusions adopted by the Council and the Ministers for Education meeting within the Council on 4 June 1984 led to the first guidelines for a general policy to improve the knowledge of languages in the Community. The aim of this policy is to offer as many young people as possible in the Community the opportunity to acquire a practical knowledge of at least two languages in addition to their mother tongue. It calls for special efforts in several areas :

- initial and in-service teacher training;
- exchanges of teachers and pupils;
- adaptation of curricula and teaching methods;
- exchanges of information and experience at Community level.

(b) Measures proposed to improve modern language teaching and learning

In accordance with the instructions received by the Council, the Commission, with the help of the ad hoc working party of national officials, initiated consideration of certain measures to be taken to improve language teaching and learning, measures which might serve as a basis for drawing up a Community programme on language teaching.

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From this exchange it emerged that a new programme was needed in order firstly to improve the standard of teaching, through better initial and in-service teacher training, and by making adequate provision for the teaching of languages in school curricula and, secondly, to improve language learning by motivating young people and creating a more positive environment, especially by developing school exchanges.

These actions should be undertaken simultaneously and should complement each other at Member State and Community level.

At the level of the Member States

It goes without saying that the education authorities of each Member State are responsible for taking the necessary measures to improve the language skills of its nationals.

In this connection, measures are required in order to :

- diversify language teaching, enabling pupils and students to learn the European languages of their choice;
- make adequate provision for language-teaching in school curricula;
- eliminate a number of structural, financial and administrative obstacles;
- ensure continuous language teaching from primary school to higher education and from vocational to continuing training for adults;
- enable teachers to give their pupils a practical knowledge of the language taught by introducing them to the cultural values inherent in that language.

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- enable future language teachers and teachers currently employed to complete part of their initial training in, or make study visits to the countries whose languages they are teaching or plan to teach;
- develop linguistic and cultural exchanges of young people so as to increase their motivation, to apply their acquired knowledge and promote the development of a European attitude.

At Community level

Clearly, Commission action can in no way replace the Member States' obligations as regards language teaching, initial and in-service training, or exchanges of teachers and pupils. However, the Community should promote exchanges of information and experience on approaches to language teaching and should encourage the mobility of future teachers, teachers in employment and school exchanges.

In the field of initial training, the Community could - by awarding grants or other appropriate means - enable all future language teachers to complete their training by spending a period of vocational preparation in the country whose language they intend to teach.

In the field of in-service training, the Community could provide a certain number of teachers already in employment with an opportunity to spend a vocational and cultural "refresher" period in the country whose language they teach by means of exchanges between teachers, trainee periods, study visits or seminars so that, for example twice in his/her career, every teacher is able to spend a teaching and learning period in the country whose language he/she teaches.

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In the field of educational and cultural exchanges for schools the Community could also act by appropriate means.

It is well known that a thorough knowledge of a language does not depend only on the way it is taught, but on the pupil's motivation.

The education authorities' responsibility cannot therefore be limited to giving teachers good training, but should also cover the motivation of pupils.

To encourage young Europeans to develop their language skills, it would be desirable to place them in a situation where they could appreciate the advantages of learning another language. School exchanges are certainly a good way to increase awareness and motivation.

The priority objective of any Community programme to develop the knowledge of languages should therefore be to step up school exchanges, so as to enable a significant number of pupils to make a linguistic and cultural visit to another Community country.

Such a programme would have an immediate effect on :

- the practical teaching of languages for communication purposes;
- teacher training, vital to ensure the quality of exchanges;
- training of escorts to provide appropriate back-up for the pupils on exchange visits.

The school exchange action programme would make a significant contribution to training young European citizens and would extend to teachers of various disciplines the possibility of taking part in the exchanges. This action would not restrict possibilities for exchanges to pupils studying languages, but would facilitate the participation of pupils interested in a scientific, technical or cultural subject who normally would have little interest in a stay abroad for a purely linguistic purpose.

While giving young Europeans an opportunity to learn how to communicate in a foreign language, this action should help schools to cooperate with each other and young people to know each other better while engaged on a common task at school, this developing their capacity to adapt and innovate.

Complementary measures

The Community could supplement the main operations proposed above (initial and in-service training and school exchanges) by a series of support measures, such as :

- appropriate assistance promoting the less widely spoken official Community languages;
- setting up a network of information centres on the teaching of foreign languages in accordance with the 1984 conclusions;
- study of and research into certain linguistic topics;
- organization of exchanges of symposium and experience (symposia - study visits).