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EUROPEAN LANGUAGE POLICY ON PLURILINGUALISM AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: *Effective communication is vital, and the need for it has never been more emphasized than these days witnessing the peak of European integration. Different institutions and organizations of the EU promote the model of the ideal European citizen speaking two foreign languages and having the needed competence to manage intercultural encounters. By analyzing the most important EU documents on language policy, this paper presents how the EU aims to publicize plurilingualism and intercultural awareness, the two most important characteristics of the European citizen.*

Key words: *plurilingualism, multilingualism, intercultural awareness, language policy.*

1. Introduction

Never in the history of Europe was the need for effective communication more articulated than now, when the expansion of the European Union leads towards an attempt to unify Europe from the Iberian Peninsula to the Skandinavian, from the Atlantics to the Balkans. Trends of economic globalization and societal internationalization made it inevitable for Europeans to speak foreign languages to be able to understand each other.

This paper presents how European policy on language education aims to promote and publicize plurilingualism and intercultural awareness, that will lead to better understanding among Europeans. I aim to highlight the most important documents that contributed to the development of the promoted model of plurilingual *European citizen*, who possesses the knowledge, skills and abilities (Byram, 1997) to cope with intercultural encounters.

2. Language Policy in Europe – Important Concepts

Although in the EU language policy is the responsibility of the member states, a considerable number of institutions and programmes deal with language learning-related issues on a continental level. The most important organization affecting European language policy is the Council of Europe, a Strasbourg-based intergovernmental organization. There are two bodies to coordinate the Council of Europe's work on language education: the Language Policy Division and the European Center for Modern Languages.

Respect for other languages and cultures has been a desired image for the Council of Europe for more than five decades. The earliest document to stress the importance

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of learning and esteeming languages of other countries was the *European Cultural Convention* ratified in 1954 by then-members of the Council of Europe. This document served to substitute the bilateral cultural conventions between the member states, and instead promoted to 'pursue a policy of common action designed to safeguard and encourage the development of European culture' (European Cultural Convention, 1954, p. 2). The European Council's activities related to language education are in accordance with Article 2 of the Convention:

'Each Contracting Party shall, insofar as may be possible,
a) encourage the study by its own nationals of the languages, history and civilisation of the other Contracting Parties and grant facilities to those Parties to promote such studies in its territory, and
b) endeavour to promote the study of its language or languages, history and civilisation in the territory of the other Contracting Parties and grant facilities to the nationals of those Parties to pursue such studies in its territory.' (European Cultural Convention, 1954, p. 2.)

Thus, Article 2 aims to ensure mutual respect for languages and cultures as well as to promote mobility that would help participants to learn more about other European cultures. Esteem for languages and openness towards other culture has been central to the Council's policy since such an early time in European integration.

However, the last five decades witnessed major changes in European society that led to changing needs in the field of language education as well. The Council of Europe's language education policy today articulates these needs as they promote (1) plurilingualism, (2) democratic citizenship, (3) linguistic diversity, (4) social cohesion and (5) mutual understanding (Language Policy Division Brochure, no date, p.2).

The *White Paper on Education and Training* (1995) is the first EU document to stress the importance of plurilingualism together with emphasizing the need for intercultural understanding:

'Proficiency in several Community languages has become a precondition if citizens of the European Union are to benefit from the occupational and personal opportunities open to them in the border-free Single Market. This language proficiency must be backed up by the ability to adapt to working and living environments characterised by different cultures.' (White Paper, 1995, p. 44)

The 1995 White Paper, however, does not use the word *plurilingual*, though the concept of the plurilingual individual is clearly presented in this document. Instead, the word multilingualism is used and is argued to be 'part and parcel of both European identity/citizenship and the learning society' (1995, p. 51). This shows that the distinction between the concepts *plurilingual* and *multilingual* was not clearly defined in 1995. The *Common European Framework of References* (2001) already discusses the difference between these notions:

'Plurilingualism differs from multilingualism, which is the knowledge of a number of languages, or the co-existence of different languages in a given society. Multilingualism may be attained by simply diversifying the languages on offer in a particular school or educational system' (CEFR, 2001, p. 4).

While discussing whether the increased use of English serves to unite or divide Europe, Philipson (2003) calls attention to the importance of the realization of the need for more foreign languages: '[a] significant development in Western Europe in the 1990s has been that the member states of the EU have endorsed the

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desirability of schoolchildren acquiring competence in at least two foreign languages' (Philipson, 2003, p. 63). This is in accordance with Willems' point of view (2002): he describes language policy in the European Union countries as 'keeping with the conviction that plurilingualism in a continent like Europe should be the norm rather than the exception' (Willems, 2002, p.8). Plurilingualism is a goal set by the Common European Framework of References. The CEFR describes plurilingualism as an approach

'emphasiz[ing] the fact that as an individual person's experience of language in its cultural contexts expands, from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples (whether learnt at school or college, or by direct experience), he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact'(CEFR, 2001 p. 4).

However, the CEFR assumes that individual language learners will become language users, and in the course of this process they not only become plurilingual, but also develop interculturality (CEFR, 2001, p. 43).

The *European Commission's Action Plan for language learning and linguistic diversity* (2003) proposes 45 steps to be taken between 2004-2006. This document describes that secondary education should ideally help young people to acquire essential skills that will help them throughout a lifetime of language learning:

''Native speaker' fluency is not the objective, but appropriate levels of skill in reading, listening, writing and speaking in two foreign languages are required, together with intercultural competencies and the ability to learn languages whether with a teacher or alone' (Action Plan, 2003, p. 9)

A 2007 Council of Europe publication, the *Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe* was drafted to promote a 'global concept' of languages and to reduce the number of ad hoc decisions taken under the pressure of time or events (2007, p. 9). The Guide is not prescriptive but it advocates that national language policies 'should at least have the common characteristic of complying with the values and principles of the Council of Europe to which Member States have subscribed' (p. 10). The Guide concludes that 'Member States may conduct different language education policies according to a common principle and purpose, relevant for Europe: to develop the plurilingual competence of every individual throughout life' (p. 107). This can be achieved partly by giving overall place to intercultural education in the education system (p. 108). The Guide also notes that language policies are 'based on principles (economy and efficiency, national identity, democracy, and so forth) which give them a meaning that extends beyond current circumstances' (p. 17). Such a core principle is plurilingualism, that is fundamental to the Council of Europe's language policy. The Guide defines plurilingualism in relation to intercultural education: 'plurilingualism should be understood in this dual sense: it constitutes a conception of the speaker as fundamentally plural and a value in that it is the basis of linguistic tolerance, an essential element of intercultural education' (p. 18).

In May 2008 the Council of Europe issued the *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* a document that 'seeks to provide a conceptual framework and a guide for policymakers and practitioners' (2008, p.5). The White Paper argues in the name of the governments of the 47 Member States of the

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Council of Europe that 'the intercultural approach offers a forward-looking model for managing cultural diversity' (p. 4). The White Paper calls for the inclusion of intercultural dialogue at all levels of education and stresses that 'all students should be given the opportunity to develop their plurilingual competence,' (p.44) further emphasizing that intercultural awareness and plurilingualism are equally important concepts in the Council's language education policy.

3. Conclusion

This paper aimed to present two important concepts in the language policy of the Council of Europe. Whether and how these proposals and suggestions are implemented in different countries' national language policy was beyond the scope of my inquiry. What I aimed to highlight was that there are common principles according to which language policy in individual countries should be framed and these principles all serve the better understanding among Europeans and contribute to the development of European identity. *Plurilingualism* and *intercultural awareness* are notions essential to consider when discussing language policy in an integrated Europe and the Council of Europe is striving vigorously in encouraging and guiding member states to incorporate these concepts into their national curricula.

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