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The future of language education in Europe: case studies of innovative practices

Executive Summary



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ABOUT NESET

NESET is an advisory network of experts working on the social dimension of education and training.

The European Commission's Directorate-General for Education and Culture initiated the establishment of the network as the successor to NESSE (2007-2010), NESET (2011-2014) and NESET II (2015-2018).

PPMI is responsible for the administration of the NESET network. For any inquiries please contact us at: info-neset@ppmi.lt.

CONTRACTOR

The logo for PPMi, consisting of the letters 'PPMi' in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. The 'i' has a small orange triangle above its dot.

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Executive summary

Linguistic diversity is one of the great strengths of the European Union. To foster the potential of linguistic diversity to support multilingual competences of students and help overcome its possible challenges, innovative policies and practices in language teaching must be implemented in European classrooms, schools, regions and countries –taking into account pedagogical shifts and ongoing societal trends such as migration and the increasing mobility of individuals.

To transform language education in Europe, it is necessary to improve the language competences of learners by not only helping them to acquire new languages, but also to maintain and develop their skills in their own languages. It is further necessary to deconstruct the existing hierarchy between languages, and to apply an inclusive perspective towards all languages, both in education and in society. In addition, languages should be used as resources in the classroom, building on students' linguistic repertoires for learning. This includes discontinuing strategies and practices that separate the target language from other languages students know, and encouraging those strategies and practices that allow transition from one language to another, resulting in a positive transfer of skills and concepts and the strengthening of each of the languages.

In this context, the main purpose of this report is to inspire educators and policy makers to innovate and implement forward-looking policies and practices in language education, by exploring novel approaches and strategies for language teaching across in Europe that support learners' plurilingualism.

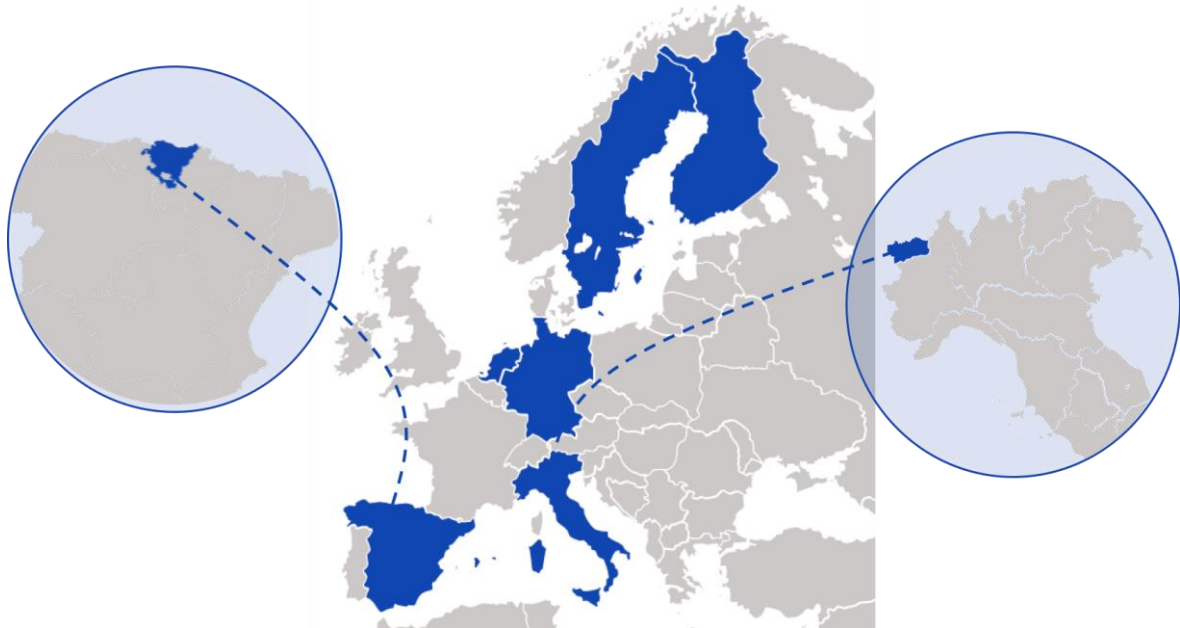
The key questions this report aims to answer are the following:

- What are the new developments in teaching and learning languages in Europe?
- How can we open spaces in pedagogy that support the activation of the languages that students bring with them into the classroom? And how do these innovative language teaching practices promote plurilingualism?
- What are the pros and cons of each of these pedagogies?
- How could these experiences be adapted to other European contexts?
- What are the key drivers, barriers and possible ways forward towards the transformation of language teaching and learning approaches across Europe?

Case studies: innovative language teaching and learning policies and practices

This report showcases a selection of policy developments and practices in language teaching across Europe, placing them into the context of evolving language teaching pedagogies and policies, and highlighting the necessary shift towards a more plurilingual approach. The six case studies illustrate how policy makers and educators have responded to the complexity of the new linguistic landscape – and highlight the need for more efficient language education in specific European contexts.

FIGURE 1 Countries and regions covered by the case studies in this report.



Source: created by the authors.

Multilingual programme Studi/Binogi

The Studi/Binogi digital platform in Sweden provides learning materials (in the form of animated videos) covering curriculum content in all subjects. These are delivered in the language(s) of the school and in several minority languages. This digital learning tool makes it possible for migrant learners to access curriculum content upon arrival in a new country, and thereby promotes the equal value of all languages. Studi/Binogi helps students to create a link between the various languages in their repertoire and enables them to develop their skills in their own language at the same time as learning a new language. In addition, Studi/Binogi creates an inclusive learning environment for all students, including students with diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Accelerative Integrated Method of foreign language teaching

The Accelerative Integrated Method of foreign language teaching (AIM) is a classroom practice for language learning used in the Netherlands. The method provides a playful way of teaching a foreign language through 'scaffolding' techniques. These use storytelling, gestures, active collaboration and repetition in the target language. So far, AIM has been used to teach French, English, Spanish and Mandarin to young beginners from around 7 to 15 years old. This case study represents an example of a language teaching and learning practice that provides equal access to high-quality language education for all students, regardless of their first language.

The bi-/plurilingual education model of the Aosta Valley

The bi-/plurilingual educational model of the Aosta Valley in northern Italy focuses on the development of plurilingualism among students in all areas of the curriculum. The model is based on alternating between languages from one day to the next. This model allows the transfer of skills and competences from one language to the other. One of the model's main objectives is to preserve the most widely spoken minority language in the region, French.

The education model of the Basque Country

The educational model used in the Basque Country (Spain) has set itself the objective of safeguarding and revitalising the Basque language. The region's education system employs a flexible, context-sensitive model in terms of languages, with immersion in the Basque language being predominant model in the region. Despite a highly successful bilingual education model, the region recognises the challenge of multilingualism that is linked to the Basque Country's changing linguistic landscape. The region is therefore considering the establishment of a more inclusive language management system that promotes and enables the development of all languages.

Language-sensitive curriculum in Finland

Finland's recently introduced language-sensitive curriculum promotes the recognition of all languages and the development of language awareness in the teaching and learning process throughout. This approach aims to ensure equal access to quality education by taking into account students' linguistic repertoires and integrating their various languages into classroom practice. The curriculum recognises the value of all languages and their importance for further learning.

The CertiLingua school network

CertiLingua is a network of schools committed to providing students with high-quality language education. The network issues a quality certificate to schools that advance language education, teaching at least two additional languages using the Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) method, as well as intercultural skills. The network's 'Label of Excellence' is awarded to students and schools that fulfil the programme's criteria. CertiLingua promotes the development of the skills necessary for social and professional interaction in an international context.

Key findings

The six case studies in this report demonstrate that language teaching strategies are responding, albeit slowly, to the general educational trends of digitalisation and the personalisation of teaching and learning across Europe, with the aim of increasing the overall quality of language education and instilling a culture of plurilingualism. The key innovation inherent to these developments lies in creating a **shift in perception** in relation to languages and their role in the process of learning. This involves the following:

- Students' first languages are not perceived as a problem or deficit, but as an asset for learning and as an enrichment of students' linguistic repertoires.
- Linguistic considerations and language learning are relevant in and for all subjects.
- All languages have equal value.
- Existing competences and talents support the acquisition of competences in other language(s).
- Students' language repertoires can consist of multiple languages, with varying levels of proficiency in each. Competences in these languages are interconnected, and are important for the development of plurilingual competences.

The case studies analysed in this report also reveal that the application of this new plurilingual perspective involves the introduction of the following elements into language education:

- A focus on language awareness within the school's teaching and learning processes.
- The active integration of students' languages into classroom practices.
- Provision of equal access to quality language education, regardless of students' first language.
- Use of the method of alternating languages to enable students to acquire the ability to use several languages in monolingual settings, and to activate both (or all), and even switch between them in plurilingual contexts.

The plurilingual practices reviewed in this report present **great potential for adaptation** to other countries or contexts. The transfer of long-standing, innovative strategies and practices for language learning is possible due to *flexibility* in the way such strategies and practices are applied, as well as the *ready-to-use tools* developed for the purpose of such application. While each of these policies and practices is tailored to its own specific context and its needs, all are transferable, taking into account the relevant context into which they will be embedded.

Key policy implications and recommendations

The shift towards plurilingualism challenges traditional conceptions and practices within language teaching and learning. Although it offers an opportunity to transform language education in Europe and move towards more inclusive and comprehensive language education, the lack of sufficient information about the benefits of emerging or reconsidered strategies and practices can hinder their effective and successful implementation across the EU. This report therefore highlights the implications of the shift towards plurilingualism and provides recommendations to facilitate the implementation of innovative teaching and learning strategies and practices.

Recommendations for policy-makers – system level

- Change is needed in the **attitudes of policy-makers/leaders towards a more positive perception** of the value of inclusive education and plurilingualism. This would create a foundation for inclusive processes at school and classroom level. To achieve such a change will require political priorities, will and vision, as well as long-term strategy and commitment focused on inclusion and equity.
- Policy makers need to **eliminate discrepancies** between the aims and objectives of plurilingual strategies and practices and their practical implementation.
- For the implementation of plurilingual policies and practice to be successful, sufficient **investment in financial and human resources** is necessary. This also involves ensuring education staff enjoy the right working conditions to be able to re-design and modernise their traditional practices.
- **Training on new language teaching pedagogies** should be incorporated more systematically into teacher education programmes and professional development systems. This includes the potential of Information and Communication Technologies, collaboration practices and an inclusive vision of plurilingualism.

Training, particularly high-quality school leadership programmes that focus on innovation and change management, should be available to all school leaders.

- **Monitoring and evaluation systems should be improved** and accompanied by institutional support for teachers and school leaders.
- An increasing emphasis on efficiency and accountability for schools and teachers may discourage them from innovating. It is therefore crucial to **build 'intelligent' systems of accountability** that combine both vertical and horizontal accountability.
- The **autonomy of both schools and teachers** is crucial, especially where no system-level strategy exists for the implementation of plurilingual practices. The lack of such autonomy can hinder innovation in language teaching and learning.
- Overall, education systems and policy makers should be ready to **adapt to pedagogical, societal and technological trends**.

Recommendations for school communities and practitioners – institutional level

- There is a need for change towards **more positive perceptions/attitudes among school leaders and the school community** towards the role of languages within the school, particularly in the vision/strategy of the school.
- There is also a need to foster a **collaborative school culture** and the creation of a plurilingual ethos across the whole school.
- The process of change at school level needs to include the **monitoring of progress** with regard to the role of languages contained in the school's vision. Furthermore, institutions must be ready to adapt on the basis of such monitoring.
- An **inclusive learning environment** is required for the implementation of plurilingual pedagogies such as linguistically sensitive language learning, and to enable educational innovation.
- Institutions should **provide support** in various forms, such as enabling teaching staff to invest time in capacity building and professional development; investing (financially) in the tools and equipment necessary for specific plurilingual practices; and providing teachers with flexibility regarding work organisation, in order to facilitate innovation.
- It is necessary to recognise that **teachers are the key agents of change**. In order to support the shift towards innovative pedagogies, schools should **allow/promote peer-learning opportunities for teachers** as well as providing institutional support for teachers to take initiatives.
- Finally, **connections and cooperation with external actors** such as universities, research institutes or the private sector, can help schools to introduce and develop innovative language learning practices. Such support may come in terms of capacity building, impact assessment, or access to the necessary tools and equipment.

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