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Concluding remarks

Dear seminar participants, dear colleagues

We have now reached the end of our working seminar and it is time to conclude, to say goodbye and, hopefully, to take with us some nourishing food for thought and reflection.

Approach of the seminar

As we explain in the conference brochure and as I indicated in my introductory remarks, as the organizers we wanted to provide a forum for an informal and open discussion on a number of topics, which we perceived to be of current interest in language education in Europe. We wished to look at what has been happening both in the intergovernmental, transnational, context (the Council of Europe and the European Union) and in national contexts. We assumed that, for optimal impact, the intergovernmental actions should be responsive to national developments, priorities, perceptions and experiences, and the member countries should exercise their right and assume the duty for adapting and applying ideas and tools in a way that is relevant in their particular contexts. We wished to see what concrete suggestions and initiatives would emerge from such an agenda for discussions.

With this general framework, i.e., some transnational and national developments on issues of topical interest in language education, we approached prominent European experts and gave them free hands in planning and running four thematic workshops. They were to give a general introduction to the workshop and invite a small number of other presentations to provide cases to illustrate different contexts, to pose questions and possibly to present challenges for group and plenary discussions.

Workshops

The workshops were started by J. Charles Alderson, who drew on his extensive first-hand experience to present a critical appraisal of the implementation of the language policy programmes of the Council of Europe and the European Union. He indicated clearly his preference for focusing on the micro-level, as policy may actually be defined at that level, irrespective of higher level policies. He indicated that there was a clear need for monitoring the impact – or lack of it – of programmes and for guaranteeing the sustainability of activities and products developed within the intergovernmental programmes and projects. Groups discussed and identified topics for a research agenda, dealt with problems and opportunities in the implementation and evaluation of language policies and programmes, and considered what lessons can be learned from the implementation of policies and programmes for future programmes and policy for the EU and the Council of Europe.

The workshop on plurilingualism, integration of native and non-native languages, was run by Michael Byram. He first responded briefly to Charles Alderson's declaration of preference for a micro-level focus in policy matters by suggesting that there is a legitimate place for important higher-level policy concerns as there is a difference between ideals, objectives and targets. He then explored and elaborated the concept of plurilingualism and presented a possible model for increasing convergences in language education. Curriculum design needs to include all languages, break through compartmentalisation of 'foreign' languages and separation of 'native/first' languages from foreign languages, and deal with 'native/national' languages being 'first/native' for some and 'second/non-native' for others. Four presenters illustrated aspects of plurilingualism in their specific contexts.

Neus Figueras presented an overview of developments in the teaching and assessment of speaking and problematised a set of issues, which were taken up by the three speakers who talked about how testing of speaking has been addressed in their contexts. Groups discussed a set of questions posed by the Chair and pointed out both possibilities and constraints in adopting and adapting the CEFR.

Felianka Kaftandjieva identified complexities and pitfalls in the application of the framework with regard to the notion of transparency, highlighted problems in transparency as shown in a recent survey of major European language certificate providers and urged us to beware "jabberwockianism", however, evocative the language of examination providers and other actors in language education may sound. She stressed that the users also have a responsibility to ask for transparent information. Transparency is a two-way responsibility: it must be demanded and it must be provided, both in response to the demands and as a characteristic of good practice.

Three short presentations followed the introduction. They dealt with the use of the Dutch CEF Construct project (and "the Grid") in assessing the linkage of listening and reading tests to the CEFR, with the development work done in Catalonia to develop and validate CEFR-related local scales and to link the test results to the CEFR, and with the development of the new assessment system in the UK and its links with the CEFR.

Discussion took up the question of external validation of CEFR-linkage, the challenges faced in accrediting a large number of language examinations in an educational system, the problem of language assessment not being an exact science, and the question of how comparable perceptions of performance benchmarks are across countries.

What follows?

The chairs will meet after the seminar and agree on how to summarise them. The summaries will be integrated into one document and they will identify action points that were suggested.

These as well as the PowerPoint presentations will be published electronically on the CALS web site after the authors have been given an opportunity to review them. You will be notified when the publication will be available.

Bon voyage

One of my absolute favourite TV serials is Yes, Minister and Yes, Prime Minister. I enjoy watching the constant duel between Sir Humphrey Appleby and Jim Hacker. In one of the episodes Mr. Hacker thanks Sir Humphrey for having given him a lot of food for thought and Sir Humphrey replied “Then I wish you bon appetite”.

I also wish you bon appetite with the food for thought the presenters and your group partners have given you and hope that you have many opportunities to reflect how this input might be transformed into output(s), relevant to your context. Hopefully we all can also make good and constructive use of the offerings of this seminar in our activities in the transnational fora. In addition to wishing you bon appetite, I also wish you bon voyage, a safe journey home. On behalf of the seminar organizers I thank you warmly for your active participation, and hope that we can continue our dialogue in various forums.