LANGUAGE POLICY

As part of its efforts to promote mobility and intercultural understanding, the European Union (EU) has designated language learning as an important priority, and funds numerous programmes and projects in this area. Multilingualism, in the EU’s view, is an important element of Europe’s competitiveness. One of the objectives of the EU’s language policy is therefore for every EU citizen to master two other languages in addition to their mother tongue.

LEGAL BASIS

In an EU based on the motto ‘United in diversity’, languages are the most direct expression of our culture. Linguistic diversity is a reality, observance of which is a fundamental value of the EU. Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) states that the Union ‘shall respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity’. Article 165(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) emphasises that ‘Union action shall be aimed at developing the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of the languages of the Member States’, while fully respecting cultural and linguistic diversity (Article 165(1) TFEU).

The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, adopted in 2000 and made legally binding by the Treaty of Lisbon, prohibits discrimination on grounds of language (Article 21) and places an obligation on the Union to respect linguistic diversity (Article 22).

The first regulation, which dates from 1958 and determined the languages to be used by the former European Economic Community, was amended following subsequent accessions to the EU, and defines the EU’s official languages[1], together with Article 55(1) TEU. The provisions of that regulation and Article 24 TFEU provide that every citizen of the EU has the right to write to any of the institutions or bodies of the EU in one of those languages and to receive an answer in the same language.

OBJECTIVES

EU language policy is based on respect for linguistic diversity in all Member States and on the creation of an intercultural dialogue throughout the EU. In order to put mutual respect into practice, the EU promotes the teaching and learning of foreign languages and the mobility of every citizen through dedicated programmes.

[1] The 24 official languages of the EU are: Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Irish, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish and Swedish.
for education and vocational training. Foreign language competence is regarded as one of the basic skills that all EU citizens need to acquire in order to improve their educational and employment opportunities. In its contribution to the Social Summit for Fair Jobs and Growth held on 17 November 2017 in Gothenburg, Sweden, the Commission set out the idea of a ‘European Education Area’ where by 2025, ‘in addition to one’s mother tongue, speaking two other languages has become the norm’ (communication entitled ‘Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture – The European Commission’s contribution to the Leaders’ meeting in Gothenburg, 17 November 2017’). The EU also works with Member States to protect minorities, on the basis of the Council of Europe’s European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

ACHIEVEMENTS

A. Policy developments and support for research on languages

1. Supporting language learning
On 22 May 2019, the Council adopted a recommendation on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages. In its recommendation, the Council invites the Member States to bolster language learning by the end of compulsory education, to ensure that more language teachers have the opportunity to learn and teach abroad and to promote innovative teaching methods using tools such as the School Education Gateway and eTwinning.

2. Comparability of data on language competence
In 2005, the Commission published a communication to the European Parliament (Parliament) and the Council on the European Indicator of Language Competence, which is an instrument to measure overall language competence in each Member State. The EU also promotes the use of the Council of Europe’s ‘Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment’ (CEFR). This tool was designed ‘to provide a transparent, coherent and comprehensive basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines, the design of teaching and learning materials, and the assessment of foreign language proficiency’. It is now widely used in Europe and in other continents.

3. The European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe and the European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning
The EU works closely with two centres for research on languages, the European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe (ECML) and the European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning (Mercator). The ECML encourages excellence and innovation in language teaching and helps Europeans to learn languages more efficiently. Its main aims are to help Member States implement effective language teaching policies by focusing on the learning and teaching of languages and supporting dialogue, the exchange of best practices and programme-related networks and research projects. The EU co-finances ECML projects to promote the linguistic integration of children with a migrant background and to establish quality and comparability criteria for language tests and their assessment. Mercator is mostly focused on regional and minority languages in Europe and works on the acquisition
and inventory, research and study, dissemination and application of knowledge in the field of language learning at school, at home and through cultural participation[2].

4. European Master’s in Translation

The European Master’s in Translation (EMT) is a quality label for university translation programmes that meet agreed professional standards and market demands. The main goal of EMT is to improve the quality of translator training and to encourage highly skilled people to enter the profession in the EU. The EMT also seeks to enhance the status of the translation profession in the EU.

B. Action programmes

1. Erasmus+ Programme

Erasmus+ is the EU programme for education, training, youth and sport for 2021-2027. The promotion of language learning and linguistic diversity is one of the programme’s specific objectives. The Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2021 states that ‘the opportunities put in place to offer linguistic support are aimed to make mobility more efficient and effective, to improve learning performance and therefore contribute to the specific objective of the Programme’ (p. 11). Erasmus+ Online Linguistic Support is offered to participants in mobility actions to help them to learn the language of their host country. Erasmus+ encourages cooperation with a view to innovating and exchanging good practices through partnerships in the area of language teaching and learning. The Erasmus+ programme also funds numerous projects to support the teaching and learning of sign languages, and to promote linguistic diversity awareness and the protection of minority languages.

2. Creative Europe Programme

In the framework of the Creative Europe Programme, support is provided for the translation of books and manuscripts under the Culture sub-programme.

3. European Day of Languages

Encouraged by the huge success of the European Year of Languages in 2001, the EU and the Council of Europe decided to celebrate the European Day of Languages every year on 26 September, with all sorts of events to promote language learning throughout Europe. This initiative is designed to raise awareness among the general public of the many languages spoken in Europe and to encourage them to learn languages.

4. European Language Label

The European Language Label is an award by the Commission designed to encourage new initiatives in language teaching and learning, to reward new language teaching methods, and to raise awareness of regional and minority languages. The award is presented to the most innovative language-learning projects, to people who have made the most progress in learning foreign languages and to the best language teachers.

5. Juvenes Translatores

Every year, the Commission awards the Juvenes Translatores prize to the best translation done by a 17-year-old pupil in each Member State. Pupils can choose to translate from and into any official language of the EU.

ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

A. Linguistic diversity

As a preliminary point, it has to be noted that Parliament has adopted a full multilingual language policy in its own communication strategy, meaning that all EU languages are equally important. All parliamentary documents are translated into all the official languages and every Member of the European Parliament has the right to speak in the EU language of his or her choice. Similarly, visits to the House of European History and the Parlamentarium (European Parliament Visitors’ Centre) are available in the 24 official EU languages.

Every year since 2007, Parliament has awarded the LUX Film Prize, which includes the subtitling of the three finalist films in the 24 official EU languages.

In its resolution of 24 March 2009 entitled ‘Multilingualism: an asset for Europe and a shared commitment’, Parliament reiterated its support for EU policies in the field of multilingualism and called on the Commission to draw up measures aimed at promoting linguistic diversity.

On 11 September 2018, Parliament adopted a resolution on language equality in the digital age, which is based on a study drawn up at the request of the Parliament’s Science and Technology Options Assessment Panel. In the resolution, Parliament called on the Commission to assess the most appropriate means to ensure language equality in the digital age, and to develop a strong and coordinated strategy for a multilingual digital single market.

On 11 December 2020, Parliament and the Council reached an agreement on the proposal for a successor programme to Erasmus+ for the 2021-2027 period. As part of its Key Action 1, this programme includes linguistic support measures in the context of learning mobility activities.

Article 3 of the agreement reached on the same date on the proposal establishing the Creative Europe Programme (2021-2027) states that one of the objectives of the programme is to safeguard, develop and promote European cultural and linguistic diversity and to promote Europe’s cultural heritage. The MEDIA sub-programme also has to take account of the ‘cultural and linguistic diversity’ of the continent, which characterises the markets of the various countries. It also added a specific provision on supporting the subtitling, dubbing and audio description of EU audiovisual content, in order to foster ‘international sales and [...] circulation of non-national European works on all platforms’.

In its resolution of 11 November 2021 entitled ‘The European Education Area: a shared holistic approach’, Parliament underlined the importance of learning foreign languages, in particular English. It underscored the need for Member States to take action to
support the development of linguistic competency at all levels, especially in primary and secondary education, to embrace the Council of Europe’s goal of ‘plurilingualism’ and to achieve the benchmark of all pupils having a sufficient knowledge of at least two other official languages of the EU at the end of their lower secondary education at the latest. Furthermore, the resolution called on the Commission to develop tools to allow the Member States to implement the Council recommendation on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages, monitor progress accordingly and provide financial support for schools teaching European language skills, especially the native languages of EU citizens living in other EU countries. It also called on the Member States to collect comparable data on language learning.

B. Support for minority languages

In 2013, Parliament adopted a resolution on endangered European languages and linguistic diversity in the European Union, urging Member States to be more attentive to endangered European languages and to commit to the protection and promotion of the diversity of the EU’s linguistic and cultural heritage.

On 23 November 2016, Parliament adopted a resolution on sign languages and professional sign language interpreters. The purpose was to stress that deaf, deaf-blind and hard-of-hearing EU residents must have access to the same information and communication as their peers in the form of sign language interpretation, subtitling, speech-to-text and/or alternative forms of communication, including oral interpreters.

On 7 February 2018, Parliament approved a resolution on protection and non-discrimination with regard to minorities in the EU Member States. This resolution encourages the Member States to ensure that the right to use a minority language is upheld and to protect linguistic diversity within the EU. It advocates respect for linguistic rights in communities where there is more than one official language and calls on the Commission to strengthen the promotion of the teaching and use of regional and minority languages.

In its resolution of 17 December 2020, Parliament expressed its support for the Minority SafePack, a European Citizens’ Initiative seeking to improve the protection of linguistic minorities.

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