

# Shifting goalposts for 21st century language education? Empowering language teachers to become agents of change



On the occasion of the European Day of Languages (EDL), Dr. Sarah Breslin, Executive Director of the European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe (ECML) was invited to Halden by The Foreign Language Centre (Fremmedspråksenteret) to give a talk on democracy and citizenship in the language classroom. In connection with her visit, we asked her some questions about this particular topic.

Foto: Privat. **Dr. Sarah Breslin**, Executive Director of the ECML

Background for the EDL: The European Day of Languages was established following the European Year of Languages in 2001 – a joint initiative of the Council of Europe and the European Union. The Council then decided

to have a yearly celebration of linguistic and cultural diversity, as a way of reminding people of the value of learning languages and of the joy they can bring.



**You have been to Halden before, in connection with the tenth anniversary of Fremmedspråksenteret in 2018 and talked about “Promoting excellence in language education” - how do you feel about being back in order to speak to language teachers in Norway about democracy and citizenship?**

When Fremmedspråksenteret asked me to come to Norway and talk about a new Council of Europe Committee of Ministers’ Recommendation on the importance of

plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture I was afraid you might well be thinking – *“what a strange way to celebrate EDL! And don’t we have enough on our plates with trying to get our heads round this new curriculum? Aren’t here to focus on the interdisciplinary topic on democracy and citizenship that is part of the new curriculum?”*

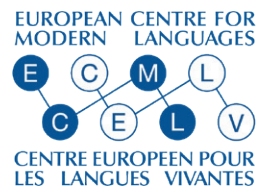
But then I thought that it could be a good opportunity to show the similarities between what we do in the Council of Europe and what you’re doing in Norway

– it’s a development at European level which can reassure you that these changes you’re getting your heads around really are the direction in which we need to go; that what Norway is trying to do is the RIGHT thing to do – it’s pioneering, just as the Council of Europe has been, and continues to be, pioneering in the field of language education.

Likewise, I hoped that my input could be seen as a chance for you to briefly step outside your national context and your day-to-day challenges, and take a broader perspective.



Logo EDL



**For those who want to know more about the Council of Europe and its European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML), could you tell us a little bit about it?**

The Council of Europe is Europe’s leading human rights organisation and the oldest

intergovernmental political organisation in Europe, comprising 46 European states and 700 million people in Europe. All member States have signed the European Convention on Human Rights. It was founded in 1949, not long after the end of the 2nd World War, in the hope of ensuring that peace would endure. Well, look where we are today – that threat has returned.

The Council of Europe aims to promote democracy and protect human rights and the rule of law in Europe, through, for example, the development of Conventions and Charters, such as the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence or the Convention on Cybercrime. In addition to these legally binding instruments, the Council develops Recommendations – the key is in the name – not legally binding - but once adopted, member states commit to their implementation. In addition to the development of such instruments, the Council works through cooperation and capacity building projects. It is very easy to confuse the Council of Europe with other European bodies - the Council of Europe is not the European Council: The European Council is the decision-making body of the European Union. So, two separate organisations but with complementary tasks and with a strategic partnership – this is also true for the ECML as an Enlarged Partial Agreement of the Council of Europe. The ECML focuses on innovation in language learning and teaching, supporting member States to implement effective language policies

by focusing on the needs of professionals working in the field. The Centre acts as a transnational mediator, mediating across languages, cultures, pedagogical traditions and sectors, building bridges across policy, research, practice and to focus.

### **Sarah, I understand you are familiar with the Norwegian core curriculum. Is there some kind of connection between this curriculum and the Council's values?**

Definitely! I really like the fact that your core curriculum goes even further than the Recommendation and includes questions of respect for nature and environmental awareness. Some elements where I see clear synergies with the Council's work in education are for example:

*School shall promote democratic values and attitudes that can counteract prejudice and discrimination. Pupils shall learn in school to respect the fact that people are different and learn to solve conflicts peacefully.*

### **Why do you think we need to put such an emphasis on democratic values now?**

Well, it's a fact that our democracies are under threat. That we've taken peace for granted for so long – that we have ignored the gradual erosion of rights in our free market societies. The notion that education is about social justice has always existed, but it needs to be restated. And sometimes a specific aspect – such as language education – needs to be dealt with at the highest political level because

of huge societal challenges. And that's where we need the Council of Europe's decision-making body, the Committee of Ministers.

On 2nd Feb this year the Committee of Ministers, comprised of the foreign ministers of all the member States, or their ambassadors, adopted a new Recommendation in the field of language education- *Recommendation R (2022)1 on the importance of plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture.*

This commitment now needs to be taken seriously. This Recommendation is strongly linked to your core curriculum.

Recommendations are developed and then adopted when the Council sees an important issue affecting many European societies and believes that a new policy instrument will help put the spotlight on this issue and give impetus to addressing the problem.

### **Sarah, the motto for the EDL this year is "Valuing all languages in Europe". What do you think about this topic?**

I think is a very serious, important and pertinent topic, when we think how language can be abused and can be used as a weapon, for example through hate speech. Valuing languages is key to promoting democracy – just think about questions of migrants' rights, or the fight against discrimination – they're



therein the definition of citizenship - how can you be active in society if you cannot communicate or express your opinions? This is why language education is a core element within the Council of Europe Education programme which aims to contribute to the development of a culture of democracy.

### What are the challenges that member States of the Council of Europe must address if they are to realise this aspiration (Valuing all languages in Europe)?

The new Recommendation addresses two specific concerns: the first is a tendency on the part of public authorities and civil society to think that proficiency in one additional language is enough as long as that language is English; the second is the populist notion that proficiency in minority or migrant languages, widespread in today's increasingly diverse societies, is harmful to societal cohesion.

These developments run counter to the Council's philosophy when it comes to languages, which is the first part of the title of the Recommendation... "Recommendation on the importance of **plurilingual and intercultural education**...". And although many of us are familiar with this concept, I think there's still a lot of work to be done to explain and justify the complexity of the it. Plurilingual and intercultural education requires a fundamental rethink

of all aspects of language education - not only within school systems, but also in higher education, in language support in the workplace and in informal learning contexts - a rethink that influences everything from policy to teacher training, institutional management, the wider school community and approaches to teaching practice - not just in language teaching, but across the curriculum.

### What concrete measures has the Council of Europe taken that can help to promote democratic values?

The Council of Europe is very active in promoting democratic values through all aspects of its work but I'd like to highlight one concrete example in the field of education: the Council of Europe has developed the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, a framework with 20 competences, which can be divided into four main categories: values, attitudes, skills and knowledge and critical understanding. Plurilingual and intercultural aspects feature in each of these categories.

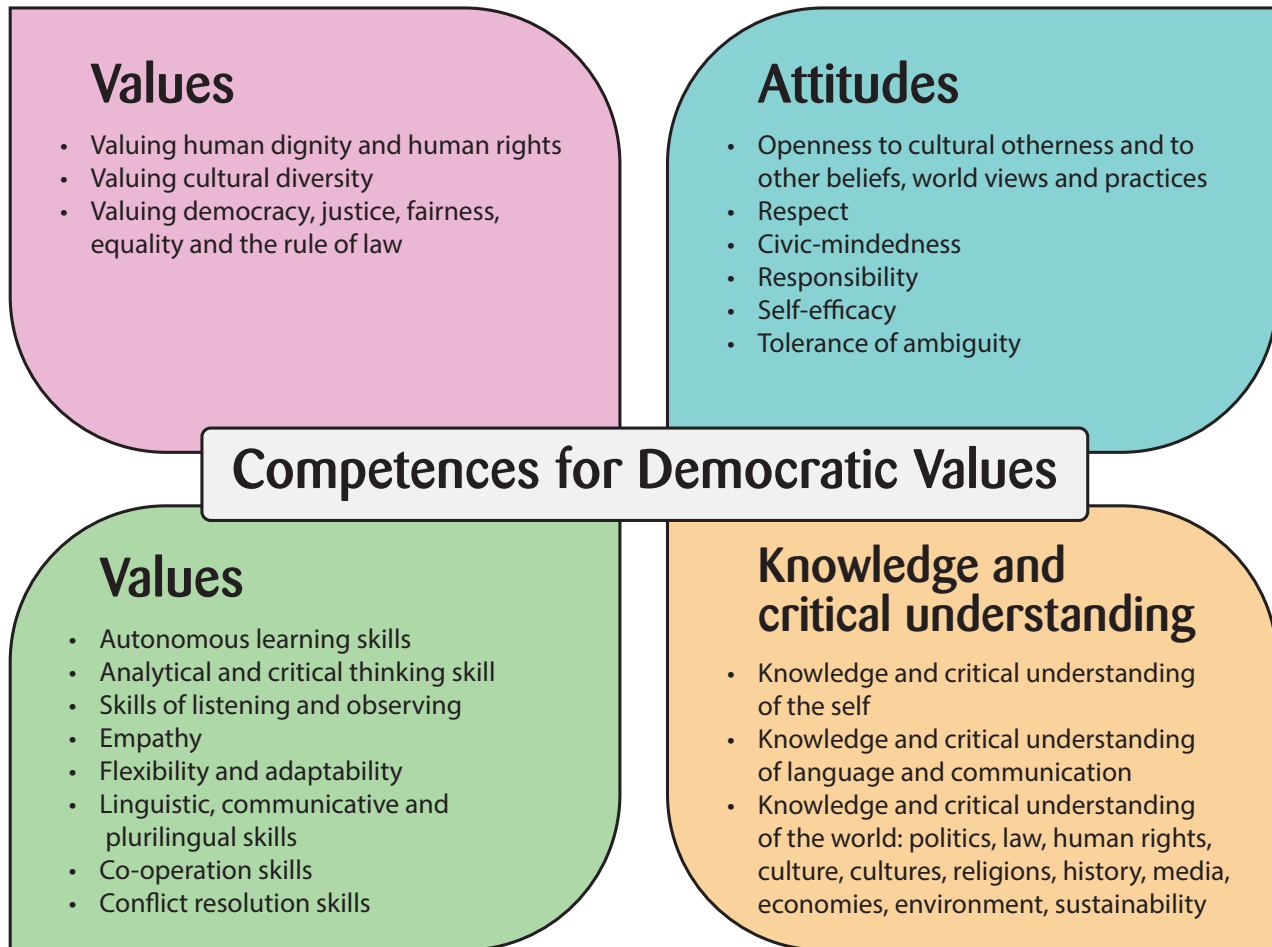
This link between quality language education and a culture of democracy has always been part of the Council of Europe's philosophy on languages, but it is time to strengthen and promote this link again. And that is what this new Recommendation is designed to help achieve.

I think it's worthwhile for all of us to take time to think through the relationship between languages, between plurilingual and intercultural education and democratic culture - and to reflect, as teachers, on how we can contribute.

And while this Recommendation is far-reaching and covers all aspects of language education, at the same time it is non-dogmatic: at no point does it "tell" member States what methodology to use or which languages to promote. It is non-prescriptive and recognises the challenges member states face.



For more information, please read the ECML's thematic area "Plurilingual and intercultural education - ECML/CELV - Thematic areas - Plurilingual and intercultural education"



Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture