

# The Value and Validity of Foreign Language Learning – the EAQUALS Perspective

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## **Europe, a multilingual continent in a multilingual world**

In the Europe of the 21st century, learning languages is almost unavoidable, even though so many of us find it intimidating and hard, especially as adults. In our everyday lives, we are constantly in touch with people and experiences that take us beyond our own language horizons either directly or through communication media. Thanks to mobility and immigration, which brings cultural enrichment to our countries, as well as filling vacant jobs, other language and cultures are all around us. In the primary schools of London, nearly 400 different languages are spoken by the children attending classes. We live in a multilingual and multicultural world. In the age of 'globalisation', our study, work and leisure experiences are ever more and more likely to bring us into contact with speakers of other languages and provide opportunities to communicate beyond the safety of our own mother tongue. For young people beginning their careers, as well as for experienced professionals on the career ladder, competence in one or more foreign languages is both essential and rewarding.

Europe has been a language-learning continent for millennia. Although English has taken the place Latin once held as a widely used lingua franca, there is nothing new in the need to be able to operate in more than one language. Foreign language teaching and learning were going on in ancient Greece and Rome, as well as in medieval and 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe - there is even a language lesson in Shakespeare's famous history play, *Henry V*, intended to divert the audience, who were already familiar with such language learning situations. Neither is being 'bilingual' or 'plurilingual' attainable only by the well-educated middle classes. On the contrary, all over the world, especially in Africa and South Asia, people who have had little access to education work and socialise on a daily basis in other languages than their mother tongue because of where they live, the need to communicate with other ethnic groups, and in order to earn their livelihood. It is a natural part of their lives, as it is for migrants all over the world, and as leaning more than language comes naturally to children, especially the youngest ones.

## **The search for high quality language courses**

Finding the 'right' courses and support for language learners is not so easy. Whether language courses are given within the national school system, at specialised language schools, or in the students' own workplace, it is vitally important to make them effective and enjoyable so that students themselves value the language learning experience. EAQUALS, the European Association for Quality Language Services, which assures the quality of teaching and learning in language schools and departments, and provides support for language teacher training, came into existence to help students and their sponsors to identify language teaching organisations which provide high quality courses.

Education these days, even history and science, is less about learning facts or rules, and more about learning practical skills that make use of the rules. This is particularly the case in foreign language learning: grammar and vocabulary are useless to language learners unless they can use them in communication activities relevant to their lives and the real world. An analogy can be drawn with computing, another essential 21<sup>st</sup> century skill: it is useless to know how computers and their

software work unless one can use a computer for essential tasks such as writing messages or reports, doing calculations, creating plans, obtaining information, or for enjoyment.

The work of language teachers is therefore challenging. They must:

- Be well trained as teachers, and good users of the language they are teaching;
- Understand clearly the language learning needs of their students, whether they are company employees, university students, or young children.
- Communicate to their students at whatever age the relevance of foreign languages to their lives and their future careers, and demonstrate how the language they are learning is useful to them;
- Develop in their students an enthusiasm for the culture of the peoples who use the language, and bring them into touch with it;
- Plan and run activities in class which are effective, are seen as interesting by their students, enabling them to practise using the language in a realistic way;
- Help students understand how the grammar and pronunciation of the language works, and give them lots of enjoyable opportunities to practise using the vocabulary and grammar of the language for communication;
- Assess individual students' progress, give them feedback and help as they progress.

### **Increasing the effectiveness of language courses**

The Common European Framework of References for Languages, produced by the Council of Europe, provides guidelines for those responsible for designing language programmes and training language teachers. This comprehensive work of references refers to four guiding principles: a focus on the practical needs of language learners, and not learning grammar and vocabulary 'for the sake of it' ; an approach that is 'action-orientated', i.e. an approach that encourages students to use language actively in carrying out tasks, not just in doing exercises; transparency, i.e. making it clear to learners at all times what they are learning and why they are learning it; and 'self-assessment', encouraging learners to be able to assess their own progress in the language, instead of just relying on teachers or tests to tell them this. These guidelines and the approach to teaching and learning that comes from them can greatly assist learners to develop a positive attitude to language learning, to get fully involved in it, and to understand the value of foreign languages in their lives.

### **Quality assurance**

The task of EAQUALS, through its inspection system, is to ensure that the language teaching and other services provided at the schools it accredits are of high quality. Every three years, independent inspectors visit the school and observe all the teachers working there in order to gain an impression of their competence, the effectiveness of their teaching, and the way in which their way of working reflects the principles above. Inspectors also look carefully at the curricula and resources being used at the schools, talk to students about their impressions of the school and the services they receive, and discuss with staff the way in which the school and the teaching programmes are managed. As a result of this process, employers, parents and individual students can be confident that the language courses at EAQUALS schools are well-conceived, well-managed and effective.

EAQUALS, together with its sister organisation, ALTE (the Association of Language Testers in Europe), has also developed an electronic European Language Portfolio which can be downloaded at [www.e-elp.org](http://www.e-elp.org) . The 'Language Biography' in this portfolio enables language learners to record their personal language learning history

and goals, and to regularly assess their own language competence across five areas with reference to the levels established in the Common European Framework. The portfolio also has a 'Language Passport', where students can record the results of formal language examinations and the courses of study they have done at schools, whether near their home, in countries where the language is spoken, or on-line. Finally there is a 'Dossier', where learners can store what they consider to be the best examples of their work in the foreign language. Thus language learners themselves take on more responsibility for their own learning and value the experience more.

### **Conclusion: Language learning and the national and international interest**

The current financial crisis has made life harder both for individual citizens and for the governments of the world. But money alone will not lead us out of the crisis. The challenge for individuals and nations is to successfully adapt to the changing situation by developing skills and awareness to help deal successfully with new realities in a competitive world whilst also maintaining their personal and national equilibrium and cultural identity. Nations whose peoples are well equipped to communicate in the international arena and accept and interact confidently with people from other cultures will be better placed to adapt in this way. Governments can assist in the effort by continuing to invest in developing the teachers and educational infrastructure needed, and providing stronger incentives for young people, adults and organisations to engage in language learning, as well as in other forms of lifelong learning. A positive plurilingual and pluricultural approach is enriching, both at a personal and a national level.

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