Bridging the gap between language policy and practice: 15 years of ECML projects

Introduction

It is my privilege this afternoon to share with you my thoughts and experiences and the insights which I have gained as a coordinator of projects which span the 15-year existence of the European Centre for Modern Languages. In doing so, I shall attempt to indicate why and how the ECML has, in my view, made a significant contribution to language education across Europe.

When I was looking back at my ECML activities in preparation for today's event, I found myself musing on an English metaphor relating to the iron railway bridge which spans the wide waterway north of Edinburgh, the Firth of Forth, or to be more precise to the painting of the Forth bridge. It is said that when painters finally get to the end of the bridge, such a long time has passed that they then have to start again at the beginning. My project work for the ECML has been of this nature. It seems that no longer have I finished one project, than another has started. I might add however that my work has not been a labour of Sisyphus, but a labour of love.

Aims of talk

According to the mission statement of the ECML, one of its main aims is 'to provide a forum and support for language professionals working at the cutting edge of language education within its 34 member states and to act as a catalyst for the development of innovative approaches'.

     This mission statement poses two questions: first, what are innovative approaches? and second, how – and how well – does the ECML provide this support?

How do projects arise?

I am aware that some members of the audience here today are not what the ECML terms "language professionals" and therefore may not be too familiar with content aspects of the ECML. I shall therefore very briefly outline how the various projects, which represent the core work of the ECML, arise and the measures which are taken to ensure that projects have maximum impact both within member states and between member states.

The projects of the ECML are organised within a 4-year framework, so-called medium-term programmes. The current period MTP runs from 2008 up to 2011; at present the ECML is supervising 20 different projects. Prior to the beginning of a medium-term phase, the ECML invites language experts from the 34 member states to submit project proposals within previously chosen general thematic areas. These language experts are, most typically, teacher educators, teachers who occupy some position of influence beyond their everyday school work – for example, as functionaries in teachers' associations - materials or curriculum developers, or language policy makers such as representatives of Ministries of Education. In other words, people who are working at the cutting edge of language education policy.

Project proposals are submitted by a coordinating team consisting of 3-4 experts from different member states. Two features of this *modus operandi* are of especial significance. As far as topics are concerned, these are chosen on the one hand on the basis of the expert knowledge of the proposer based on the current state of the art of language education and, on the other, from the actual needs of language teaching. It is thus overwhelmingly the case that ECML projects are not ivory tower projects carried on over the heads of language practitioners but combine innovative theoretical insights with very concrete measures to support the implementation of innovation at what used to be called "the chalk face".

A second requirement of the ECML is that members of coordinating teams have their working base in different member states. To give one example from one of the projects I have coordinated, members of the coordinating team came, in addition to Austria, from Latvia, the Netherlands and Slovakia. This important measure ensures that projects do not have a cultural bias. The project outcomes are thus relevant to teachers from Spain in the west to Armenia in the east, and from Iceland in the north to Cyprus and Malta in the south.

A third important feature concerns project participants. Each member state is permitted to nominate one language expert to take part in projects. It is a requirement of project participation that participants carry out measures in their country to ensure that the outcomes of the ECML are disseminated to the wider educational community. These measures together seek to ensure that

- project content is at the cutting edge of innovative language education
- project outcomes meet the actual needs of language teachers and teacher educators
- project content has a wide impact within member states
- projects cut across national, cultural and language borders

The nature of innovation

Being a language teacher in the modern world is not an easy task. I can remember that, back in the early 1970s, one of my own teacher educators, Carl Dodson, would often express his view that language teachers should be paid more than other subject teachers since foreign language methodology requires both more skill and more theoretical knowledge. It does seem to me that, especially nowadays, being a language teacher places more demands on teachers than with other school subjects. One reason for this is that language teaching is, by its very nature, inextricably interwoven with theories of linguistic theories of language and language acquisition and, in recent years, to theories of culture and theories of human cognition. This means that innovative insights, both useful and less so, are constantly emerging, which are processed and packaged by a growing army of applied linguists and researchers and dangled before the eyes of language teachers.

The relationship between theory and practice and the implementation of innovation is a complex issue. It is often claimed that on the one hand language teachers pay too little heed to theory and research and, on the other, that the spheres of inquiry of researchers are of little relevance for the classroom. This uneasy relationship is perhaps summed up in Alan Maley's famous, and not too serious, comment: 'Theory

is when we know everything but nothing works. Practice is when everything works but no one knows why. We have combined theory and practice: nothing works and no one knows why!'

I should add that this comment was made at about the time the ECML was founded. It seems to me, however, that the uneasy theory-practice relationship has changed in recent years. In my view, given the sheer volume of innovative ideas which they have been confronted with, language teachers across Europe have shown a remarkable interest in and openness to innovation.

In order to put this view into some kind of context, I would like you to imagine a language teacher who began her teaching career in 1995, the year in which the ECML was founded. Since she completed her teacher education, the following innovative trends have been in the focus of language education but will have figured either not at all, or very little, in her own teacher education.

1. One very obvious innovation concerns information and communication technology (ICT) – since 1995 there has been a vast expansion of resources and accompanying teaching methods: cyber-exercises, interactive programmes, learning platforms, Internet resources, Blogs, Emails, Youtube, video conferencing etc., all these can provide support for language learning but require special expertise on the part of the teacher.
2. Second, there has been a continuous shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred views of language education, which has rapidly gained in momentum. An emphasis on 'autonomous learning,' means that it is the task of modern teachers not only to facilitate language acquisition but also to guide learners to reflecting on and taking greater responsibility for their own learning.
3. As is well known, an important watershed in the history of language teaching was the publication by the Council of Europe in 2001 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, which provided, amongst other things, a comprehensive specification of language and cultural competences. For teachers, this meant a fundamental shift in how they viewed the learning-teaching relationship and required them to see aims and objectives not only in terms of what they taught, that is to say, their input but in terms of learner competences, that is to say, the expected outcomes of learning.
4. The years following the publication of the CEFR saw the appearance of many versions of the European Language Portfolio. Not only did this represent a new tool for language learning but it required a rethinking of teacher procedures to incorporate a reflective mode of learning.
5. Another fundamental change has occurred in the redefinition of the nature and goals of teaching culture. The traditional *"Landeskunde"* approach was fact-based – these facts were sometimes of a bizarre nature; I can recall reading in a school textbook the intriguing information that in England a gentleman walks upstairs in front of a lady, and downstairs behind her. New terms such as 'sociocultural knowledge', 'intercultural awareness', 'intercultural skills', 'existential competence' to be found in the CEFR reflect the widening of cultural goals.
6. The final point I shall mention, although the list could be continued, concerns the concept of 'linguistic diversity' and the goals of promoting what the CEFR refers to as plurilingualism. In bygone times, languages other than that which was being taught, were often regarded almost as linguistic terrorists which had infiltrated the language learner's mind and which would subvert the learning process with the

deadly weapon of 'interference errors'. In the meantime, there is, however, wide acceptance that other languages provide a rich and fertile source both for language learning and for the development of what the CEFR calls an 'intercultural personality'.

In short, teachers have, over the last 15 years, not only experienced an extensive broadening of the goals of language learning but an intensity of theories and research findings.

In his poem 'The deserted village' Oliver Goldsmith describes the respect the villagers held for the village schoolmaster with the words 'And still they gaz'd and still the wonder grew, That one small head could carry all he knew.' It seems to me that the knowledge and expertise that the small heads of modern language teachers nowadays have to carry also deserves our wonder.

The sweeping changes that have taken place in the role of language teachers give rise to the important issue of how innovative insights can best be mediated to language teachers and implemented in the classroom. It is here that the ECML projects and publications play a crucial role. All of the specific areas of innovation listed previously have been the subject of many projects which provide not only theoretical background but also concrete examples of how innovation can be brought into the language classroom.

How does the ECML support innovation? Case studies

I should now like to refer specifically to three projects I have coordinated and illustrate how they have, in my view, contributed to the implementation of innovation. My comments will be generalisable to many other ECML projects.

'Approaches to Materials Design in European Textbooks: Implementing Principles of Authenticity, Learner Autonomy and Cultural Awareness', St. Petersburg, 1997

In the year 1997, I had the opportunity to coordinate a project entitled 'Approaches to Materials Design in European Textbooks: Implementing Principles of Authenticity, Learner Autonomy and Cultural Awareness'. The central event of this project was a workshop held in St. Petersburg, which was attended by approximately 50 textbook authors from 15 different countries. One aim of this project was to raise awareness for locally produced textbooks since at that time, not long after the opening up of Europe, countries were being bombarded with international textbooks which, in many cases, were at odds with national teaching cultures and learners' needs. The resulting publication contains both a theoretical discussion of the complex concepts of learner autonomy and cultural awareness and provides examples of teaching materials taken from a wide variety of European school textbooks: an extremely valuable source for language teacher education and one that my own students constantly refer to.

I should like to make two points about this publication, which apply equally to all ECML publications. First, it is not language specific. One great advantage of ECML projects is that they cut across language barriers and are multilingual in orientation and application. Insights gained from the projects will be just as relevant for the teaching of Spanish as for the teaching of Estonian.

Second, theories and materials in the publication are the result of input from a wide variety of teaching and learning cultures. What the publication contains is therefore not a French view of culture or a Lithuanian view of culture but a European view deriving from a consensus of opinion from all participating states.

The word 'consensus' is important here. It is, of course, not synonymous with 'uniform'. Perhaps I can illustrate this with reference to a checklist of principles – measures that can be taken to foster cultural awareness in the classroom. This list was drawn up by participants to the workshop and can be found in the publication. One principle relating to the development of cultural awareness states that 'Students develop a feeling of national identity and an awareness of being a member of an international community.' I can remember intense discussion about the first part of this statement at the workshop. The original version proposed by some workshop members was 'students take a pride in their country'. This formulation proved to be quite controversial; opinions on the concept of 'national pride' were spread across a spectrum of highly positive to extremely negative. However, a consensus was reached resulting in the more objective phrase 'a feeling of national identity'. The word 'consensus' reflect two concepts which are at the core of all ECML projects: those of 'harmony' and 'diversity'.

'Methods for Facilitating Communicative Competence in a Multicultural Society',
Sarajevo 1998

The second project I should like to refer to concerns a specific programme offered by the ECML: so-called 'national events' which are organised in one of the member states and co-financed by the host authorities with local or regional participants. In 1998 a workshop took place in Sarajevo, with the title 'Methods for Facilitating Communicative Competence in a Multicultural Society'. Unusually for an ECML event, not two but three working languages were used at the workshop and the event was organised in collaboration with the Austrian organisation KulturKontakt, the British Council and the French Embassy, who provided funding and expertise. Clearly, in the year 1998, local educational infrastructures were in the process of rebuilding; nevertheless, due to the strong engagement of the organising committee in Sarajevo teachers from all areas of Bosnia-Herzegovina attended the two-day workshop. Participants also included a group of teachers from the Republika Sprska.

The workshop took place in a building which had suffered substantial damage during the years of conflict – here you can see a picture. At the time, it was being renovated, a process which began on the bottom floor and was gradually moving upwards. As you can see, at the time of the workshop renovation of the lower floors had been completed. The reason why I took this photograph was that I felt it had a certain symbolic character. By holding this national event at this particular time, which, was attended by participants from member states of the ECML and by teachers across the country and beyond, the workshop made, I have been told by colleagues in Bosnia-Herzegovina, an important contribution to the rebuilding of professional structures.

European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages

The third project that I shall specifically refer to is one that I am currently coordinating and one which, I think it is true to say, has had a particular impact, both in Europe and beyond. The outcome of this project is a publication entitled the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages, known by its acronym EPOSTL in English, PEPELF in French and EPOSA in German. The origins of this project go back to the year 2004 or thereabouts when the Governing Board expressed the wish that a project should be added to the 2nd MTP, which would contribute to, I quote, 'harmonising teacher education in Europe'. At a meeting of 12 experts from member states was born the idea to create a portfolio of competences for use in teacher education. This was duly implemented by a team of 5 authors from Austria, Armenia, Norway, Poland and the UK. EPOSTL eventually was published in 2007.

In compiling the EPOSTL we were able to draw on important work already carried out by both the Council of Europe and the European Commission. Three documents were of particular significance for us.

1. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, which provided a comprehensive description of language and cultural competences
2. The European Language Portfolio, which showed how the competences described in the CEFR could be expressed in the form of 'I can' descriptors,.
3. The European Profile for Language Teacher Education, a document produced by the European Commission, which provides a comprehensive and eminently useful framework for the design of teacher education courses.

When considering the contributions that these documents had made, it seemed to us that one important piece of the jigsaw puzzle was missing. The CEFR and the ELP had specified the language and cultural competences which language learners need to develop. What was needed, however, was a specification of didactic competences that student teachers need to develop in order to support the acquisition of language competences among learners.

What is the EPOSTL?

The outcome of these deliberations was the EPOSTL, which – I quote - is a document intended for students undergoing their initial teacher education which encourages them to reflect on the didactic knowledge and skills necessary to teach languages, helps them to assess their own didactic competences and enables them to monitor their progress and to record their experiences of teaching during the course of their teacher education.
At the core of EPOSTL are 195 descriptors of didactic competences, expressed as 'I can ...' statements. Two examples of descriptors are:

- I can select reading texts appropriate to the needs, interests and language level of the learners.
- I can cater for a range of learning styles.

For those interested in further details of the EPOSTL, I would refer you to the recently published information pack.

Why is EPOSTL important?

The reactions to the EPOSTL by teacher educators across Europe have been overwhelmingly positive. Since its publication in English, French and German in 2004 the ECML has received a number of applications from member states to translate it into local languages. The current number of translations lies at eleven: in additional to those mentioned there are versions in Croatian, Dutch, Polish, Romanian, Hungarian, Lithuanian, Greek, Italian, Russian and Spanish. Most of these can be downloaded from the EPOSTL website. It is particularly satisfying that even countries who are not member states of the ECML have shown an interest. Currently it is being translated into Turkish. In August I shall have the pleasure of holding a series of workshop on EPOSTL and related issues to teacher educators and language researchers in Japan.

Why has the EPOSTL proved so successful? I think its unique selling points – this is something of a misnomer, of course, since EPOSTL is available free of charge – are the following.

- Makes competences, aims and content transparent to students;
- Promotes reflection in teacher education and lays the basis for lifelong learning;
- Creates a bridge between teacher education institutions and schools mentors and supports teaching practice;
- Aids curriculum and course design – especially when used in combination with the European Profile for Language Teacher Education;
- Aids comparability and strengthens professional networks between institutions, different countries etc. mobility.

In connection with competences, EPOSTL is clearly in line with the Bologna Process, which is being implemented at many tertiary education institutions in countries across Europe by helping to specify 'Learning outcomes' of teacher education courses.

EPOSTL has been a considerable enhancement to my own teacher education courses and is currently being piloted across Europe. At the moment a publication is in preparation which focuses on the implementation and acceptance of EPOSTL in member states.

Conclusion

The outline that I have given in the short time available has, by necessity, been somewhat sketchy and does not do justice to the breadth and depth of the work of the ECML. Nevertheless, I trust that I have been able to indicate in part the very important contribution that the ECML has made to the implementation of language policy and innovation in language education. Its projects have had a considerable impact in many member states and its publications are an extremely rich source of both theory and practice for teacher educators, teachers and student teachers.

I should like to conclude my remarks by making a point which from my perspective of 15 years of working with the ECML is strongly apparent to me but may be less apparent to others. One of the strengths of the ECML is that it has continually evolved and responded to the particular language education needs of the time. In the 1990s it fulfilled the important function of creating a platform and forum of language educators to respond to the political changes which Europe was undergoing. This can be seen, for example, in the St. Petersburg project I have referred to. Similarly,

the Sarajevo workshop met an important language policy need of the time. In the first decade of this century, the EPOSTL has provided a much-needed tool in the wake of the publication of the Common European Framework of Reference and the European Profile for Language Teacher Education. The title of the 3rd medium-term programme 'Empowering language professionals' strongly reflects a new concept in language education, namely 'teacher autonomy', which the EPOSTL seeks to support. In most recent projects and now at the threshold of the next MTP, it is clear that the ECML is responding to the considerable challenges arising from a greater commitment to and support for the acceptance and establishment of plurilingual and pluricultural approaches in language education.

Finally, I should like to express my warm thanks to the staff of the ECML for their constant and excellent provision of support which has greatly enhanced the quality of not only my, but all ECML projects. At the moment having almost arrived at the end of another round of the Forth Road Bridge, I am slowly closing my paint tins and washing out my paintbrushes but, as a teacher educator, I will look forward with great anticipation to future developments.