

Graz, 17 March 2014

## **Giving a voice to languages**

European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) organises high-level conference on language education • Experts and decision makers meet 20-21 March in Styria • Central element of Austria's chairmanship of the Council of Europe

Multilingualism is a reality in today's Europe - and as such represents an inherent part of the continent's identity. In this context the Council of Europe acts as a forum for the promotion of economic and social progress in pursuit of a clear goal: on the one hand retaining the linguistic and cultural diversity of the continent and on the other, encouraging the learning and use of languages as a means of promoting intercultural dialogue, social cohesion and democratic citizenship.

It is against this backdrop that the conference "Quality education and language competences for 21st century society: traditions, challenges, and visions" takes place on 20-21 March in Graz, the capital of the Austrian province of Styria. Initiated by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education and Women's Affairs (BMBF) and organized by the European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe (ECML), experts will discuss key issues relating to multilingual societies, as well as quality criteria and innovation in language teaching. The conference represents a significant contribution of Austria's current chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of Council of Europe. The ECML was founded twenty years ago as an institution of the Council of Europe.

Among the 150 participants are language experts from all over Europe, representatives of the Council of Europe and the European Commission, policy makers as well as representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

As keynote speaker, Professor Henry Widdowson (University of London, University of Vienna ), who is a renowned linguist and authority in the area of teaching English as a Foreign Language, will focus on how the understanding of language teaching, language learning and the perception of foreign languages have changed in recent years. According to Widdowson the traditional approach concentrates on language teaching where the ultimate goal is for the learner to develop near-native language capabilities in one or more foreign languages. Even the more advanced approach of plurilingualism is based on acquiring comparable linguistic skills in different languages. His concept of lingualism focuses on the basic skills of language acquisition, in order to develop communicative techniques in different languages in a more targeted manner as needed.

Additional impulses to the conference will be provided by the Professional Network Forum, which comprises 14 international associations and organizations with strong practice-based experience and expertise in the area of language teaching.

A range of presentations, panel discussions and roundtables will shape the discussions around the conference theme of "traditions, challenges and visions" of language teaching. Further inspiration will be supplied through three short films on different multilingual teaching situations, innovative architectural designs and concepts for learning spaces in the school environment, together with the question of how to involve digital natives and which educational concepts are most likely to motivate them.

Within the European Union, 24 languages are officially recognized and more than 60 are acknowledged as regional and minority languages. According to the Eurobarometer survey of June 2012, more than half of EU citizens (54%) can converse in at least one language other than their mother tongue, a quarter (25 %) speak at least two additional languages. 88 % of the Europeans surveyed find it very useful to have foreign language skills.

Austria displays the highest growth rates in Europe in terms of developing language skills. Taking the study from 2005 as a comparison, 16% more Austrians, 78% in total, currently have a sufficient level of competence in a foreign language to hold a conversation in that language.

The European Centre for Modern Languages was established in 1994 as an institution of the Council of Europe and is committed to the promotion of linguistic and cultural diversity. The 32 member states agree on thematic priorities for the Centre's programme on a four yearly basis. The current, 2012-2015, programme is dedicated to "Learning through languages: Promoting inclusive, plurilingual and intercultural education".

The ECML is the only European institution which, in close cooperation with over 30 education ministries works towards improving the quality and attractiveness of language learning. In 2013 a formal cooperation agreement with the European Commission was reached. The ECML is funded by the member states, with its seat provided by the host country Austria, through the BMBF, the province of Styria and the city of Graz.

## Further information

At a glance: the [programme](#)

Conference site and live webcast: <http://www.ecml.at/conference>

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