



Proposal to develop the Language Policy of European Schools

Introducing elements of flexibility in the educational offer to better serve students' needs

Interparents, April 2021

The need to continue change and evolve the Language Policy

[The Language Policy of the European Schools](#), adopted in 2019, is an important achievement in providing a framework for and guidance on the teaching and use of languages in the European Schools. The understanding at its approval was that many elements related to its implementation would require ongoing discussion to optimise the arrangements for the teaching and use of languages in the European Schools in the best interest of all students.¹ Some of these might be later included into updates of the policy itself.

The principles and objectives of the European Schools oblige the schools to take into account students' differing abilities and to cultivate pupils' personal, social and academic development.² While the Language Policy acknowledges that more and more children come from bi- or multilingual families, it doesn't adequately address some important issues related to the diversity of languages and language levels of European School students and their needs for a differentiated teaching. The aim of this document is to initiate discussion on these issues so that necessary changes and improvements can be made.

¹ See Annex to the Language Policy.

² <https://www.eursec.eu/en/European-Schools/principles>

Background

There is, within each class group, a very wide range of Language 2 (L2)³ capabilities in the European Schools - one that is much wider than that usually envisaged for mixed-ability learning in a national monolingual school contexts. The proficiency level of students ranges effectively from beginner to advanced, with the learning needs of students who have native or near-native competence in their L2 being fundamentally different from those of traditional second language learners. This difference is more pronounced when formal teaching of the L2 has just started, but tends to narrow over time as proficiency in the L2 increases.

In most of the European schools, there is a stable and significant proportion of students who have native or near-native competence in their L2 even in the early years. Many of these often start a course having already acquired the expected competences. This is not because such students are more gifted, but because they have higher L2 language exposure as they: a) have parents with two different mother tongues, one of them being a native of the chosen L2 language, b) have attended an L2 international school prior to entering the European School, c) have had high exposure to the language of the local community when this is the L2; or d) have been exposed to L2 for a significant number of years as SWALS (Student Without A Language Section). The difference in the language exposure can be as much as 450 hours for traditional second language learners versus thousands of hours for learners who fall into categories such as those listed above at the end of the Primary cycle. This kind of discrepancy in exposure is seldom applicable in other school subjects, e.g. Maths, Science or Human Science.

The L2⁴ has a special role in the curriculum of the European Schools. All pupils have to study an L2 from the first year of formal schooling up to the Baccalaureate. In addition, from the third year secondary, the L2 gradually becomes the language of tuition for Human Sciences, History, Geography, Economics, Religion and Ethics ("Content and Language Integrated Learning"). This requires that all students should be fluent enough in their L2 by S3 to take those classes without poor proficiency interfering with their ability to grasp these subjects at an appropriate level of sophistication.

Language instruction in mixed ability classes can be most effective if the gap in learners' proficiency is not too large to bridge. **In the current system, if the gap is too large, both students and teachers are put in a suboptimal situation. Regular L2 language learners** are put under unnecessary pressure by their peers for whom the L2 is in fact one of their L1s. At the same time, **newcomers ("late arrivals") and absolute beginners** to the system, in particular in secondary, do not always get sufficient support and chance to catch up on their L2 skills. As a consequence, they tend to shy out from actively participating in class and can be demotivated. **Students with native or near-native proficiency** in their L2 are not challenged, are bored and waste valuable instruction time. And last but not least, it is in practice very challenging for **teachers** to cater for the students' distinctively different needs in view of the extraordinary range of language skills in the classroom. Establishing a fair marking scale can also be difficult (e.g. if the marking scale and the attainment descriptors are

³ Similar considerations apply also for L3. However, the focus on L2 is because of its special role in the curriculum of the European Schools.

⁴ See also Glossary to the Language Policy.

applied as intended, students with native or near-native proficiency are more likely to get good grades without making any effort).

Teaching languages at an advanced level requires substantially different pedagogical methods and teaching materials than teaching it at intermediate, but especially at beginner levels, the focus of teaching being elsewhere.⁵ The feedback on differentiated planning for and teaching coming from Whole School Inspections regularly shows that differentiation is not yet a well-established practice in the European Schools. It should be noted that differentiation is difficult even in a standard set-up. Implementing differentiation is much more challenging or even at its limits when the range of different proficiencies is much wider than the norm.

A response to these challenges can be the introduction of flexibility in the educational offer to better serve all students' needs, an issue identified also by the Pedagogical Reform Working Group⁶. **Possible approach could be by providing teaching of the L2 as a combination of a 'mainstream groups' for regular second language learners and of 'advanced bilingual group' for learners with native or near-native proficiency in the language. The advanced bilingual group would use the same approach to teaching as it is done for the dominant language.** In the case of the EEB1, this approach was used for more than a decade as a bottom-up initiative led by the language teachers to facilitate teaching and appropriate learning for all students, while it is still used at the EEB2.

Parents' and students' feedback from the European Schools (e.g. EEB1, EEB2) using this approach is generally positive although difficult to measure. Teaching and learning for students in mainstream groups is facilitated by reducing the otherwise extraordinary span/range of language skills in the classroom. Such an arrangement allows for more effective differentiation and allows teachers to address the needs of all learners and, in particular, to support low-achievers in both groups. Students in mainstream groups, including late arrivals, are reported to gain confidence as they get more space for participation as well as more targeted teaching for their language levels, enabling them to do well in subjects taught in L2. At the same time learners with native or near-native L2 proficiency are able to continue developing their L2 through the more in-depth study of language. Beyond that both groups become more engaged, motivated and challenged, thus supporting their positive attitude towards learning. Importantly, a transition from mainstream to advanced groups should be ensured and encouraged. In addition to the pedagogical benefits of such an arrangement, it can easily be demonstrated that such a system is budgetary neutral. To ensure that this approach delivers benefits for all it should be transparent and well communicated so that there is a shared understanding that it is not about 'better' or 'worse' education, but about adapting to better serve the students' needs.

The Language Policy of the European Schools doesn't prevent use of flexible methods⁷ but it also doesn't encourage or support it. It leaves it to the individual schools to devise a way of adapting the class situation to provide a suitable education with many open questions (e.g. how many groups to

⁵ Keuken, F. & Vermeer, A. *Nederlands als tweede taal in het basisonderwijs*. (2016). Derde druk. Amersfoort: ThiemeMeulenhoff.

⁶ Proposal for a Language Policy in the European Schools, 2019-01-D-19-en-1. Also parents and/or parents' organisations from various European Schools are continuously calling for improvements. They have raised those issues in exchanges with the school administrations or adopted position papers, an example of which is can be found here: [EEB1](#).

⁷ The Language Policy acknowledges that the learning needs of SWALS are different from non-SWALS, but stops short in providing guidance and support to the schools to cater for them.

create, how to allocate students and teachers to these groups, if and how to assess students' knowledge, how to cater for students where numbers do not permit a separate bilingual L2 group). While autonomy is welcome to better respond to specific situation of the school this increases the burden for each school administration to look for solutions and leads to a heterogeneity of approaches and differences in learning and teaching opportunities for students and teachers across the European Schools.

In his presentation about second language teaching at the information meeting on the European Schools in 2020⁸, Mr Giancarlo Marcheggiano, the Secretary General of the European Schools, assured participants that OSGES is working on developing mechanisms to help pupils to evolve in their competence in the language following their own already acquired competence trajectory. He also emphasized that an important asset of the European School system is that teaching of the second language is provided by teachers who are native in that language, a practice which is different from general practice in many national systems.

One additional aspect which is not catered for in the current organisation of the teaching and use of languages in the European Schools is the possibility of studying different languages at the same level concurrently although the 2L1⁹ reality is one which characterises an increasing number of European School pupils coming from bi- or multilingual families. L3 (and L4) can in principle be chosen from among the official languages of the European Union, but because of various constraints students' opportunities to use them to maintain and develop their different L1s are in the reality much narrower. A response to these challenges can be allowing learning of two L1s (2L1). In addition, solutions are needed to expand the effective number of European languages offered as L2 and L3.

Actions to develop Language Policy of the European Schools

The Language Policy envisages its revision on a regular basis when changes require. Interparents consider that the significance and reach of the above mentioned issues warrants discussion in the Pedagogical Reform Group with a view to putting in place changes at the level of the organisation of teaching and learning.

To fulfil the European Schools' mission to provide a multilingual and multicultural education of high quality from nursery level to the Baccalaureate and to better address students' learning needs, the Board of Governors is called to:

- instruct the Office of the Secretary General to develop the mechanisms to enable students to evolve in their language competence following their own already acquired competence trajectory by
 - providing guidelines and encouraging and supporting the school administrations in organising L2 as a combination of advanced/bilingual groups alongside the mainstream groups for the benefits for all students and teachers,

⁸ 10 January 2020, recording available at <https://webcast.ec.europa.eu/information-meeting-on-the-2020-2021-registrations-to-the-european-schools#>

⁹ 2L1 concept is now an accepted one in the literature on language acquisition. See e.g. de Houwer, A. 1994. Bilingual First Language Acquisition. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters

- exploring opportunities for the progress of traditional second language learners (e.g. enrichment groups),
 - facilitate pilot projects, mutual learning, identification and exchange of good practices in the organisation of the L2,
- give a mandate to the Pedagogical Reform group to explore a systemic solutions in the medium term:
 - allowing learning of two dominant languages (L1s),
 - expanding the effective number of European languages offered as L2 and L3, also using on-line tools,
 - looking at the formal introduction of Advanced L2 earlier in the curriculum.

Notwithstanding the above, it is important to maintain educational support for late entry students as well as for those with diagnosed difficulties with language learning.

The Annex below includes drafting proposals to amend the Language Policy, which would support the implementation of suggestions above.

Annex: Possible changes to the Language Policy of the European Schools

Section 2.3 Multilingualism and the linguistic repertoire of pupils

[p. 6, add sentence to the fourth paragraph]

The level of language acquisition and skills can be different from pupil to pupil, but some minimum standards of competence are aimed at. This stock of language competencies builds up during the entire period of schooling. **Notwithstanding this, the diverse language levels and students' differing abilities are taken into account and differentiation, also through grouping, is supported so that all students, including those at both the lowest and highest attainment levels, have the opportunity to continue to progress in the learning of the different languages in their repertoire.**

4. Student Without a Language Section (SWALS)

[p. 8, include track changes and add sentence to the last paragraph]

Experience shows that due to the above described situation, **SWALS proficiency in ~~progression in competence~~ in Language 2 tends to progress faster for SWALS pupils is faster than that of for other pupils.** They often reach the required level of proficiency (e.g. B2 in secondary 5 or C1 in secondary 7) earlier than their peers. Although their **proficiency** level of Language 2 is usually higher than that the ones of non-SWALS pupils, they still often need support, as they learn the majority of their subjects in their Language 2 together with native speaking pupils. Experience shows that their needs in terms of language support are different from those of non-SWALS pupils. Schools are aware of these needs and within their capacities offer remedies to bridge the gaps. Dedicated support for these pupils in Language 2 can be offered within the framework of the Educational Support Policy **or within regular teaching. The Office of Secretary General should provide clearer guidelines and support to the school administrations in their efforts in this area.**

Section 5.1 Teaching languages

[p. 9, while developing conditions to allow students to study different languages at the same level, add sentence to the third paragraph from the end of the section to improve flexibility and differentiation]

It should be noted that normally no language should be studied at more than one level simultaneously and the existing regulations rule out the possibility of different languages being studied at the same level at the same time. Level refers to the different possibilities L1, L2, L3, L4 and L5. However, **this doesn't prevent the European Schools from ensuring differentiation, also through grouping, so that all students, including those at both the lowest and highest attainment levels, have the opportunity to progress in their language acquisition.**

Annex, 1. Teaching of languages

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