

# Autonomy, autonomisation and the Council of Europe: the interdependence of pedagogy and politics

David Little  
Trinity College Dublin

# Preliminaries

- As a pedagogical concept, autonomy has inescapable implications for political systems
- As a political concept, autonomy has inescapable implications for pedagogical orthodoxy
- In life generally, autonomisation is a precondition for responsible and critical participation in democratic processes
- In (language) education, autonomisation
  - equips learners to take control of their learning now and in the future
  - integrates their learning with their developing identities
- These considerations have been the basis of the Council of Europe's education policies since the 1970s
- And yet autonomisation still seems to be experienced by a minority of pupils, students and adult learners

# Overview

- Establishing the basics: the Council of Europe's 1970s adult education project
- Failure at European level: the European Language Portfolio
- Some ground for hope: plurilingual approaches to (language) education
- Conclusion

# Establishing the basics: the Council of Europe's 1970s adult education project

# The Council of Europe and education

- The Council of Europe's foundational values
  - Human rights
  - Democratic governance
  - Rule of law
- European Convention on Human Rights (1950)
- All Council of Europe education projects aim to help develop the individual citizen's ability to participate, critically and proactively, in the democratic process
- Trim (1984: 3): "A principal aim of the Council's work in the field of education, culture and sport is to promote the development of individuals who combine self-awareness and self-reliance with social awareness and social responsibility. Societies composed of individuals with these qualities are more likely to interact on the basis of mutual understanding and acceptance, and to maintain and develop strong, stable and yet dynamic democratic structures and processes"

# Autonomy and autonomisation in adult education

- The Council of Europe's project *Organisation, Content and Methods of Adult Education*
  - Adult education should foster “a new type of cultural production by taking the real problems of everyday life into account in carrying out the educational process” (Janne 1977: 17–18)
  - Adult education should be based on “self-learning”, which “generally refers to the practice of working in groups, and to the choice by participants of objectives, curriculum content and working methods and pace” (ibid.: 27)
  - Working in groups “implies the possibility of dialogue (in other words, self-learning must be the result of an ***interpersonal dialectical dialogue***)” (Janne 1977: 53)
- Adult education “becomes an instrument for arousing an increasing sense of awareness and liberation in man and, in some cases, an instrument for changing the environment itself. From the idea of man ‘product of his society’, one moves to the idea of man ‘producer of his society’” (Janne 1977: 15; cit. Holec 1981: 1)
- Autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning and entails “fixing the objectives, defining the contents and progressions, selecting the methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the acquisition procedure, evaluating what has been acquired” (Holec 1981: 9)

# “Interpersonal dialectical dialogue”

- Dialogue is interactive discourse in which the participants share initiation rights
- Politically there can be no democracy without dialogue
- Pedagogically there can be no autonomisation without dialogue
  - The role of the teacher in the classroom (cf. Little, Dam & Legenhausen 2017)
  - The role of the adviser in self-access and distance language learning (Riley 1985)
- Note that all current theories of L2 acquisition assign a central role to spontaneous, interactive language use
  - Dialogue conducted in the target language fosters the development of L2 agency (Little 2020)
- Note also that dialogue plays a central role in current pedagogical theory
  - Alexander’s (2020) theory of dialogic pedagogy explicitly links teaching and education with political goals in a way that recalls the Council of Europe’s adult education project of the 1970s

# Failure at European level: the European Language Portfolio



# The politics of the CEFR

## Chapter 1 of the CEFR recalls

- the overall aim of the Council of Europe:
  - “to achieve greater unity among its members” and to pursue this aim “by the adoption of common action in the cultural field” (Council of Europe 2001: 2)
- that governments should
  - “promote, encourage and support the efforts of teachers and learners at all levels to apply in their own situation the principles of the construction of language-learning systems ... by basing language teaching and learning on the needs, motivations, characteristics and resources of learners ...” (ibid.: 3)

## *Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe*

- “The exercise of democracy and social inclusion depends in part on language education policy” (Council of Europe 2007: 9)
- “The teaching of languages has aims which are convergent with those of education for democratic citizenship” (ibid.: 18)

# Autonomy and autonomisation in the CEFR

- Because it is a reference framework, “it is not the function of the [CEFR] to promote one particular language teaching methodology but instead to present options” (Council of Europe 2001: 142)
- Nevertheless: “For many years the Council of Europe has promoted an approach based on the communicative needs of learners and the use of materials and methods that will enable learners to satisfy these needs and which are appropriate to their characteristics as learners” (ibid.)
- What is more: “Learners are ... the persons ultimately concerned with language acquisition and learning processes. ... However, few learn proactively, taking initiatives to plan, structure and execute their own learning processes. Most learn reactively, following the instructions and carrying out the activities prescribed for them by teachers and by textbooks. ...” (ibid.: 141)
- Although the CEFR itself does not acknowledge the fact, its action-oriented approach to the definition of proficiency in terms of language use licenses a radical response to this state of affairs

# Autonomy and autonomisation in the CEFR

- The CEFR assumes that “the language learner is in the process of becoming a language user, so that the same set of categories will apply [to language learning as to language use]” (Council of Europe 2001: 43)
- The CEFR views “users and learners of a language primarily as ‘social agents’, i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish” (Council of Europe 2001: 9) – and agency is central to autonomy
- The CEFR’s action-oriented approach to the description of proficiency implies that spontaneous language use should play a central role in language learning, which in turn implies the possibility of a dialogic process leading to autonomisation
- According to the CEFR, proficiency develops as a result of the learner’s efforts to use the target language, and monitoring “leads to the reinforcement or modification of [the learner’s] competences” (Council of Europe 2001: 9)
- Monitoring – the exercise of metacognitive agency – plays an essential strategic role in language use and is an inescapable dimension of autonomisation in language learning

# The European Language Portfolio

## Purpose

- To mediate the ethos of the CEFR and the values of the Council of Europe to language user/learners
- To encourage and support
  - Learner autonomy
  - Intercultural awareness and intercultural learning
  - Plurilingualism
- To familiarize language user/learners with the CEFR's action-oriented definition of language proficiency
  - Goal-setting and self-assessment using checklists of “I can” descriptors (derived from the CEFR's illustrative scales)

## Potential

- Cumulatively to disclose the trajectory of the owner's history of language learning and language use
- To implicate language learning in the owner's ongoing “identity work”
- The ELP and Riley's (2010) tripartite theory of identity
  - Language passport and **person**: “the ‘you’ that others address”
  - Language biography and **self**: “the agent of my actions”
  - Dossier and **ethos**: “interpreted self-expression”

## A brief history

- 1997: The concept of the ELP introduced together with the second draft of the CEFR at an intergovernmental conference held in Strasbourg
- 1998–2000: Pilot projects carried out in 15 Council of Europe member states and by four INGOs
- 2001–2009: ELP design and implementation supported by a series of eight European seminars
- 2000–2010: 118 ELPs from 33 member states and six INGOs validated and accredited by the ELP Validation Committee
- 2011–2014: 23 further ELPs registered by the Council of Europe
- 2004–2007, 2008–2011 and 2012–2013: a succession of ECML projects that focused on ELP implementation

## Obstacles to widespread use

- ELP development was rarely part of a larger reform of curricula and assessment
  - There was often a mismatch between curriculum goals and “I can” descriptors
- Official support for ELP implementation rarely continued beyond pilot projects
- The Council of Europe’s *ELP Principles and Guidelines* did not encourage local evolution of the ELP in use
- ELP models were often too “heavy”, which brought them into conflict with textbooks
- The ELP’s focus on learner autonomy was often in conflict with dominant teaching methods
- Goal setting and self-assessment, on which successful ELP use depends, were alien to most national education systems and teachers

## Obstacles to widespread use

- ELP development was rarely part of a larger reform of curricula and assessment
  - There was often a mismatch between curriculum goals and “I can” descriptors

There have been successful implementations of the ELP, but it has never been in widespread use: the Council of Europe's hope that it would give learners (greater) control of their language learning has been disappointed

- Goal setting and self-assessment, on which successful ELP use depends, were alien to most national education systems and teachers

Some ground for hope: plurilingual approaches  
to (language) education



# Definitions and implications (CEFR)

- Plurilingualism

- “a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact” (Council of Europe 2001: 4)
- A plurilingual repertoire develops from “the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples (whether learnt at school or college or by direct experience)” (Council of Europe 2001: 4)

- Language education transformed

- The aim is no longer “simply to achieve ‘mastery’ of one or two, or even three languages, each taken in isolation, with the ‘ideal native speaker’ as the ultimate model” but to “develop a linguistic repertory in which all linguistic abilities have a place” (Council of Europe 2001: 5)
- A plurilingual approach to (language) education logically starts from the learner’s home language
- The adoption of “interpersonal dialectical dialogue” in contexts of linguistic diversity leads to powerfully effective autonomisation

# Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní), Blanchardstown (Little & Kirwan 2019)

320 pupils from 4½ to 12+ years

Most had little or no English when they started school



80% from immigrant families

51 home languages, most of them unknown to teachers

Afrikaans, Amharic, Arabic, Bangla, Benin, Bosnian, Cantonese, Cebuano, Dari, Estonian, Farsi, Foula, French, German, Hebrew, Hindi, Hungarian, Igbo, Ilonggo, Indonesian, Isoko, Itsekiri, Italian, Kannada, Kinyarwanda, Konkani, Kurdish, Latvian, Lingala, Lithuanian, Malay, Malayalam, Mandarin, Marathi, Moldovan, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Shona, Slovakian, Spanish, Swahili, Tagalog, Tamil, Ukrainian, Urdu, Vietnamese, Visayan, Xhosa, Yoruba

# The fundamentals of policy and practice

## Principles underpinning the Irish Primary School Curriculum:

- Pupils should realize their full potential as unique individuals (Government of Ireland, 1999: 7)
- “... the child’s existing knowledge and experience form the basis for learning” (ibid.: 8)
- Language “helps the child to clarify and interpret experience, to acquire new concepts, and to add depth to the concepts already grasped” (ibid.: 15)
- “... the child is an active agent in his or her learning” (ibid.: 8)
- “... the life of the home is the most potent factor in [the child’s] development during the primary school years” (ibid.: 24)

## Implications for the inclusion of EAL pupils (English as an Additional Language):

- The Primary School Curriculum assumes a strong link between school and home
- EAL pupils have lived their pre-school years mostly in a language other than English/Irish
- Their home language is central to their sense of self, the default medium of their discursive thinking, ever present in the unspoken stream of their consciousness
- If EAL pupils are to “realize their full potential as unique individuals”, ways must be found of including their home languages in the educational process, which means adopting a ***plurilingual approach***

# Scoil Bhríde's language policy and classroom discourse

- Scoil Bhríde encourages EAL pupils to use their home languages for whatever purposes seem to them appropriate, inside as well as outside the classroom
- When home languages are unknown to the teacher, they can perform three functions in classroom discourse
  - As the medium of reciprocal communication between pupils with the same or closely similar home languages
    - During the period of play that starts the day in Junior Infants
    - In pair or group work as pupils move up the school (they report their results to the teacher and the rest of the class in English)
  - For purposes of display: “This is what we say in my language”
    - Junior Infants learn to count first in English, then in Irish, and then EAL pupils show the class how they count in their home language; home languages are used in this way in action games and many other classroom activities
    - In due course this practice supports the transfer of emerging literacy skills from English and Irish to home languages
  - As a source of linguistic intuition and insight
    - “In English, you find a *door* inside and a *gate* outside. In my language [Chinese] we use the same word inside and outside”
    - The teacher wrote *octopus* on the whiteboard and asked the class how many legs an octopus has. A Romanian pupil said that *oct-* reminded her of the Irish word *ocht*, so perhaps an octopus has eight legs



# Dialogic teaching and learning

- The Primary School Curriculum expects teachers to start from what pupils already know: “**action knowledge**” elicited by “**exploratory talk**” (Barnes, 1976)
- **Exploratory talk** creates a learning conversation (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) that is **dialogic**: although the teacher controls the discourse, pupils always have the right to offer initiatives
- In the case of EAL pupils, this right is confirmed by encouraging them to use/draw on their home languages, which allows them to make a **unique** contribution
- When pedagogy is truly dialogic (Alexander, 2020), schooling is a continuous conversation in which every “**long turn**” can be transformed at any moment into reciprocal talk
- Never-ending dialogue supports a process of never-ending autonomisation that is initiated by encouraging pupils to use their home languages and sustained by their gradually expanding linguistic repertoires

# Learning outcomes

- Pupils
  - achieve high levels of age-appropriate literacy in English, Irish, French and (in the case of EAL pupils) home languages, this last without benefit of instruction
  - develop unusual levels of metalinguistic awareness
  - undertake ambitious language-related projects on their own initiative
- Scoil Bhríde is ranked in the top 12 per cent of schools in the country as regards the teaching and learning of Irish
- In the standardized tests of maths and reading that pupils take each year from First to Sixth Class, Scoil Bhríde consistently performs above the national average
- The inclusion of home languages in the educational process
  - fuels and drives “interpersonal dialectical dialogue”, which in turn fuels and drives a process of never-ending autonomisation
  - promotes pupil self-esteem, well-being and social cohesion

# The Sixth Class pupil who taught herself Spanish

## Spanish letter for Ms. Kirwan

Querido Ms Kirwan,

El más grande director jamás. Siempre le recuerdo y todas las cosas que haces. Se extrañaremos pero usted tiene que ir. Cada vez que pienso en ti. Voy a pensar en todas las cosas que has hecho para la escuela. Su amor por el lenguaje, su amor por el aprendizaje. Usted es una parte de esta escuela. Usted es una parte especial de esta escuela. Se queremos. No te olvides de nosotros. Por favor, vístala. Continúa siendo tú. No cambiar. Manténgase el mismo.

I know you can't understand most of this letter but it's just about how much we'll miss you, all the great things you've done for us. Your love of language and love of teaching. You're a special part of this school. We will always remember you and everything you do. Stay the same. We all love you.

## How she did it

- Found two books in the school library, one with a CD
- Has "a book ... to say what a chair is in Spanish or ... put chair into a sentence"
- Got a "verbal book to learn my nouns and proverbs and stuff like that"
- Uses Google Translate "If I want to do something quick ... but usually I use my own words and then I see if Google Translate can get it right"
- Also uses Babel and Five Thousand Words in Spanish (online resource), which "gives you quizzes as well to see if you're doing well or if you should go back to another lesson"

# The Sixth Class pupil who taught herself Spanish

Spanish letter for Ms. Kirwan

Querido Ms Kirwan,

## How she did it

- Found two books in the school library, one with a CD

This 12-year-old pupil's experience of Scoil Bhríde's plurilingual approach to education has inspired her to devote a large part of her spare time to learning Spanish. Her success reflects the extent to which she has been able to internalize the processes of *interactive dialectical dialogue* that have shaped her schooling

how much we will miss you, all the great things you've done for us. Your love of language and love of teaching. You're a special part of this school. We will always remember you and everything you do. Stay the same. We all love you.

Also uses Babbel and Five Thousand Words in Spanish (online resource), which "gives you quizzes as well to see if you're doing well or if you should go back to another lesson"



# Conclusion

## In a nutshell

- In the 1970s the Council of Europe's adult education project gave us "interpersonal dialectical dialogue", which shapes the discourse of learner advising and teaching and creates democratic learning environments in which autonomisation is paramount
- In the 2000s the European Language Portfolio aimed to promote widespread autonomisation in language education but foundered on the lack of a common pedagogical tradition of "interpersonal dialectical dialogue"
- In the 2020s, if education assigns an active role to ***all*** languages present in the learning environment, it creates space for an "interpersonal dialectical dialogue" that autonomises ***all*** learners and fosters social cohesion, thus reaffirming the essential interdependence of pedagogy and politics

# References

- Alexander, R. (2020) *A Dialogic Teaching Companion*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Barnes, D. (1976) *From Communication to Curriculum*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Council of Europe (2001) *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Council of Europe (2007) *Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Government of Ireland (1999) *Primary School Curriculum: Introduction / Curaclam na Bunscoile: Réamhrá*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Holec, H. (1981) *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon. (First published 1979, Strasbourg: Council of Europe)
- Janne, H. (1977) *Organisation, Content and Methods of Adult Education* (CCC/EES (77) 3–E). Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Little, D. (2020) Language learner autonomy: Rethinking language teaching. *Language Teaching, First View*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444820000488>
- Little, D., L. Dam & L. Legenhausen (2017) *Language Learner Autonomy: Theory, Practice and Research*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

# References

- Little, D. & D. Kirwan (2019) *Engaging with Linguistic Diversity: A Study of Educational Inclusion in an Irish Primary School*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Riley, P. (ed.) (1985) *Discourse and Learning*. Harlow: Longman.
- Riley, P. (2010) Reflections on identity, modernity and the European Language Portfolio. In B. O'Rourke & L. Carson (eds), *Language Learner Autonomy: Policy, Curriculum, Classroom* (pp. 373–385). Bern: Peter Lang.
- Tharp, R. & R. Gallimore (1988) *Rousing Minds to Life: Teaching, Learning, and Schooling in Social Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Trim, J.L.M. (1984) Introduction. In J.A. van Ek & J.L.M. Trim (eds), *Across the Threshold: Readings from the Modern Languages Projects of the Council of Europe* (pp. 2–6). Oxford: Pergamon.