

The Educational Value of Foreign Language Learning¹

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Abstract

This paper deals with the aspirations of language teaching to go beyond the teaching of communication skills, its educational and humanistic purposes. It argues that these aspirations can be implemented in practice, and demonstrates with the help of experimental project work how the aims of intercultural communicative competence - an established aim in many countries - can be combined with those of education for citizenship, to create 'intercultural citizenship'. This is illustrated with one project in which children in Denmark and Argentina worked together using English as a lingua franca to plan and put into operation 'actions in the community' which benefitted from their international exchanges of information and views. In the final stage of this argument, the work of language teachers is located in the societal context in which language learning takes place. In particular, language teaching can be seen in the European context as a location where competences for intercultural and democratic dialogue and activity can be developed. This is made operational through the new *Reference Framework of Competence for Democratic Culture* produced at the Council of Europe.

Keywords: intercultural competence, citizenship education, democratic culture, Council of Europe

1 Introduction

A brief review of the last century or so of language teaching in many countries would show a struggle between teaching languages as an academic subject with educational value, which engages and stretches the faculties of the mind as much as any other academic subject, and on the other hand a common-sense view that languages are learnt for everyday use and communication. Precisely what stretching the mental faculties might mean was no more stated than what was meant by 'communication'. This is not the place to explore this lapse further but I want, in introducing this struggle, to point out that educational value has long been attributed to language learning, even if in recent decades it has been lost from sight. It has been lost from sight largely because the common-sense view that learners should acquire communication skills when learning a foreign language at school or university has prevailed, at least in the rhetoric, and 'communicative' methods have flourished, at least in principle. Realities may differ and where older methods have been retained - methods of language analysis and comparisons between languages, often described as 'the grammar translation method' - they have neither developed beyond the vague promises of the past, nor convinced learners of their value when juxtaposed with the contemporary instrumental value of communication.

My purpose here is not to turn back the clock, nor to dismiss the instrumental value of

communication. Part of what I will propose is an enrichment of the concept of communication, which is often seen merely as exchanging information. This is an impoverished notion which needs a new emphasis on 'interaction' to indicate that people are not simply communicators of information and that they need skills which allow them critical understanding of others and of the processes of human interaction.

2 Purpose, aims, objectives

The reasons why foreign languages are taught in general education - as opposed to vocational training for business and commerce - are not always self-evident. Many 'users' of education - parents, employers, students themselves - often transfer the purposes from vocational education to general education, and assume that languages are learnt and taught for practical uses. We need to be more precise than this and to do so, we can distinguish among the three levels of 'purposes', 'aims' and 'objectives'.

The first and most abstract level, 'purposes', refers to the overall philosophy and significance of language teaching and learning, embodied in such phrases as language learning leading to 'liberation from insularity', a phrase taken from the English national curriculum, from the island of Great Britain. The second level, 'aims', refers to the ways in which purposes are re-formulated in the expectations about the outcomes of a period of teaching and learning, the expected achievements. 'Objectives' are the specific, concrete learning outcomes which we use for planning teaching and assessment.

In the following example from England I have divided the introductory statement into purposes and aims:

Purposes/Aspirations

Learning a foreign language is a liberation from insularity and provides an opening to other cultures. A high-quality languages education should foster pupils' curiosity and deepen their understanding of the world.

Aims

The teaching should enable pupils to express their ideas and thoughts in another language and to understand and respond to its speakers, both in speech and in writing.

It should also provide opportunities for them to communicate for practical purposes, learn new ways of thinking and read great literature in the original language.

(English National Curriculum 2014:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-languages-programmes-of-study/national-curriculum-in-england-languages-programmes-of-study>)

In a similar but more complex statement from Norway, we can see the emphasis on not just the practical aims (in italics), but also on the overall purposes (in bold), which are articulated particularly clearly. The final section here is particularly relevant for the examples and concepts I shall develop below:

Purposes

Foreign languages are both an **educational subject and a humanistic subject**. This area of study shall give opportunity for experiences, joy and personal development, at the same time as it opens greater possibilities *in the world of work and for study* in many language regions.

Competences in language and culture shall give the individual the possibility **to understand, to 'live into' and value other cultures' social life and life at work**, their modes and conditions of living, their way of thinking, their history, art and literature.

The area of study (languages) can also contribute to developing interest and tolerance, **develop insight in one's own conditions of life and own identity**, and contribute to a joy in reading, creativity, experience and **personal development**.

Good competence in languages will also lay the ground for participation in activities which build **democracy beyond country borders** and differences in culture. (My (literal) translation – emphasis and numbering added) //www.udir.no/kl06/PSP1-01/Hele/Formaal - accessed March 2018)

In this final section, the important notion of democracy is extended to an international practice, to democracy beyond borders, and I shall show below how this can be put into practice.

Before doing so, however, I want to consider the purposes of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001), because it is one of the most influential documents in language teaching worldwide (Byram and Parmenter, 2012). Unfortunately, the educational and political purposes of the CEFR have been overlooked. John Trim, the main author of the CEFR, explained a decade after its publication, that the original purposes were social and political:

as a Council of Europe project, [the] aim was to promote language learning not as an end in itself (...) but rather as a contribution to the over-arching political aims of the Council. It should serve to improve international understanding and cooperation, promote methods that strengthen democratic practices and develop the learner's independence of thought and action combined with social responsibility. (Trim, 2012 p. 23)

This purpose is not well articulated in the CEFR, nor in the new Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2018), and the focus of the attention of its many users has been largely on how it can be used for practical aims. For attention has been almost exclusively on the six levels of competence and how these can be used in teaching and assessment. It is important to remember Trim's words.

3 Realising educational and political purposes

One approach to putting educational and political purposes into practice is through combining the purposes and aims of foreign language teaching with those of education for citizenship. In other words this is to operationalise the building of 'democracy beyond country borders and differences in culture' which the Norwegian curriculum document encourages us to do.

To demonstrate this, I begin from practice, from an experiment in teaching English in Denmark

and Argentina, summarized in the following and described in full detail in Porto et al. (2017):

Green Kidz: Young learners engage in intercultural environmental citizenship in English language classroom in Argentina and Denmark.

Melina Porto, Petra Daryai-Hansen, María Emilia Arcuri and Kira Schifler

Participants and aims

The learners were 10-12 year olds in Argentina and in Denmark who were learning English as a foreign language (and in this experiment used English as a lingua franca). During the experiment they met through the internet and worked together as we shall see below.

The teachers formulated two kinds of aims as follows:

THINKING

- that learners should explore and reflect on environmental issues - globally and locally
- that learners should understand environmental issues and how to recognize them in their own surroundings,
- that learners should challenge taken-for-granted representations of the environment, for example in the media

ACTING

- that learners should engage in activities trash sorting and recycling practices,
- that learners should contribute to improving the environment in their local communities This was the element influenced particularly by citizenship education and was labelled as ACTION IN THE COMMUNITY

Activities

STAGE 1 –DISCOVER ABOUT ‘US’ AND PREPARE FOR ‘THEM’

- Learners identified what they called ‘green crimes’ in their schools and in their communities and drew or video-taped these crimes (for example computers left running without being used)
- Learners analysed the trash thrown away in their school and local community; this involves analysis listing, classifying and sorting trash in waste bins

The process here is that each group in each country should prepare a presentation for the other and be careful to think of what they needed to tell the other group about their school and environment, taking nothing for granted.

STAGE 2 –PRESENT ‘US’ TO ‘THEM’ AND COMPARE

- Each group (or in fact smaller sub-groups) used a wiki to present what they had found out about their own environment to the other (sub)groups and compared what they found (using a wiki)

- Groups carried out further investigations such as a survey among family members, friends, etc. about their environmental habits, and again compared on the wiki
- Some groups analyzed critically (audio) visual media images and texts, produced in Argentina and in Denmark,

The process here is to present 'us' to 'them' i.e. still thinking in terms of 'us' and 'them' but learners need to be aware of not taking for granted that 'they' have the same experience as 'us'.

STAGE 3 –WORK TOGETHER –IN 'US AND THEM' GROUP

- In mixed Argentinean and Danish sub-groups the learners collaborated online, using skype and wiki to design leaflets etc. to raise awareness of environmental issues among people in their environment - the school and their ;local community.

Using the internet to share understanding

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uysvpqx2vN0>
- <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Save-the-Planet-Argentina/603179783054514>
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uysvpqx2vN0>
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8zTIOCskmo8>
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DjgTR6QeetQ>
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGE9oq3hTdo>

The process here is to create international groups which begin to see that environmental issues are global as well as local and are interrelated, with the intention that the learners acquire a new international identification as well as their local and national identity.

ACTION IN THE COMMUNITY

STAGE 4 –FOCUS AGAIN ON 'US' AND ACTING ...

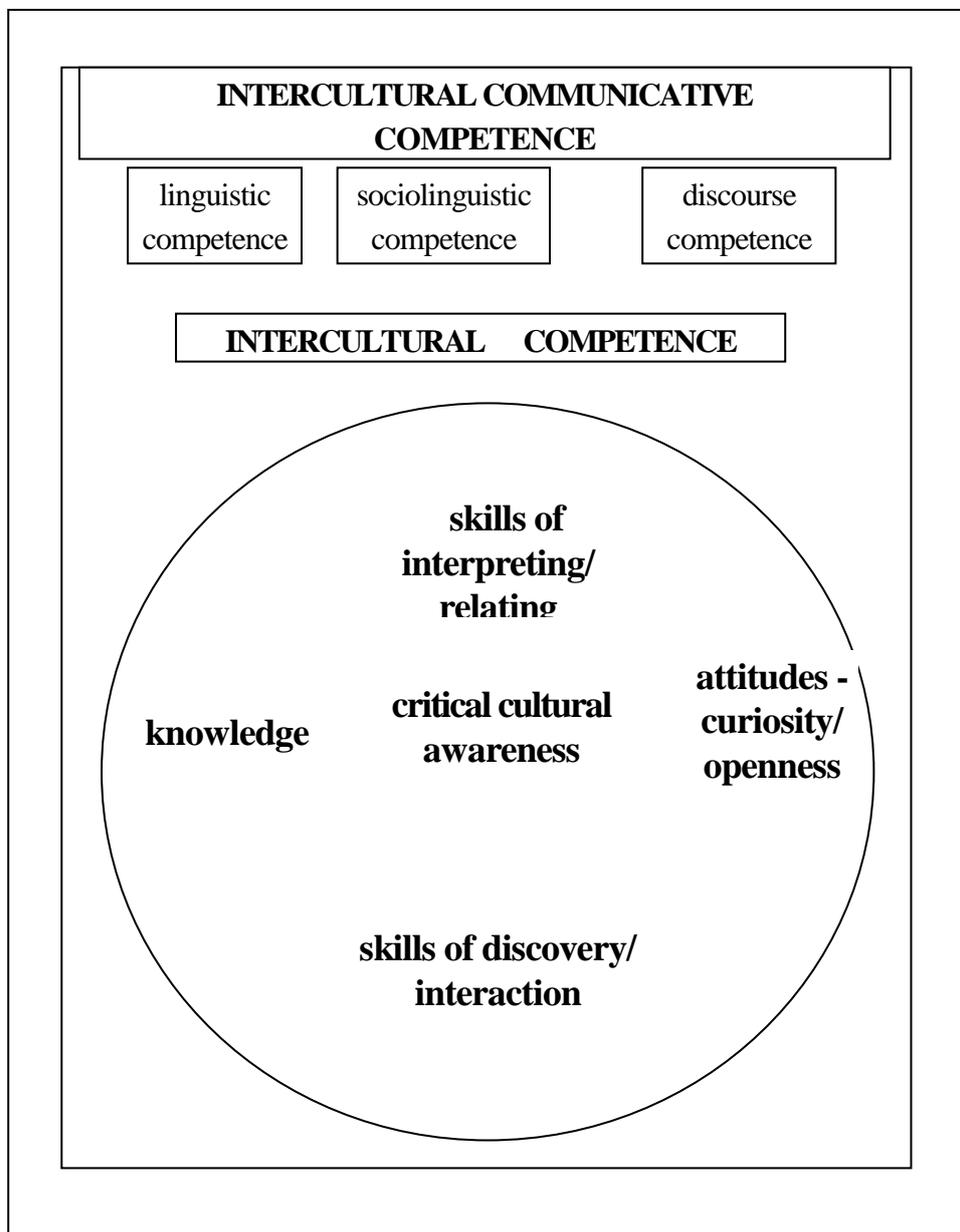
At this point groups 'returned' to the issues in their own environment - with a new international perspective - and carried out actions of different kinds with the intention of taking their classroom learning activities into their communities - with a different perspective than if they had remained only within their local/national perspectives - and of making some change of benefit to the community.

For example the Argentinean pupils:

- created videos and songs and shared in Facebook page

- were interviewed by a local journalist and got the collaborative posters published in local newspaper,
- designed a “pasacalles” (banner) and hung it in the school street.

The work of a group of university and school teachers illustrated here and developed at length in the various chapters of Byram et al. (2017), is based on a model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) (Byram, 1997) and curricula for citizenship education. The ICC model was produced for language teaching, and language teaching turns the gaze of learners away from themselves onto others and then back to themselves. In doing so, learners analyse other people’s languages and cultures, juxtapose them with their own, and reflect critically on both, on their own culture - their beliefs, values and behaviours - and on other people’s. The model of ICC is encapsulated in this diagram:



Citizenship education adds an important dimension to the outward-looking perspective of language teaching. It adds a focus on active participation in society in the 'here and now'. Citizenship education encourages young people to take action in their local community, to improve life for themselves and their fellows. This is formulated in a statement for the English national curriculum which was the original foundation for the notion of 'intercultural citizenship', i.e. the competences developed in the Green Kidz example referred to above:

Citizenship education has 3 related purposes:

1. Social and moral responsibility:

Learning self-confidence and socially and morally responsible behaviour

2. Community involvement:

Becoming involved in the life of neighbourhood and communities, including learning **through community involvement and service** to the [=our] community.

3. Political literacy:

Learning about the institutions, problems and practices of our democracy (...) how to make themselves effective in the life of the nation - a concept wider than political knowledge alone.

(Citizenship education in England (from Ministry website in early days of Citizenship Education in National Curriculum : <http://www.ncaction.org.uk/subjects/citizen/index.htm> - accessed January 2005 - emphasis added)

It is the second point which is most important in our work i.e. the emphasis on involvement and participation. To this is added, from language teaching, a concern for 'democracy beyond the country borders', and an analysis of problems and solutions valid for the local community but influenced by an international exchange of views and experiences.

If we now consider again the 'Green Kidz' example, the two important features of the project are that the learners reflect critically on a social issue - recycling and the environment - with the help of their peers from another country, and also take action in their own communities, influenced by the exchange they have had with their peers in the other country. They analyse what people do in their own community; they make judgements about what they see; they compare with people's actions in another country; together with peers in that other country they decide on action; and they carry out action in their community which is intended to make changes for the better, and to explain to their community how people in another country perceive and act upon similar social and political problems.

4 Learning from experiments

The development of the Green Kidz and other experiments would probably not have happened

without the support of a network of teachers and researchers, as described in the book (Byram et al. (2017). It is undeniable that it is not easy to be a busy teacher and simultaneously produce innovative work. The question arises therefore as to what can be learned from experiments for day-to-day teaching.

Despite the difficulties, my first recommendation is that teachers should do their own projects. The production of the book was intended to help in this; anyone is welcome to repeat and/or amend what is described in the book. It is certainly not necessary to use these examples as models for all teaching, but one project a year, over perhaps 10% of the time available in a year, will have disproportionate effects. Teacher associations such as AJE can help teachers find partners in other countries. As with the Green Kidz example, partners do not have to be native speakers of the target language. Like English in that example, Japanese can be used as a lingua franca. There are indeed advantages in this, since learners work with peers who are also learners, and are not intimidated by native speakers with their superior competence.

The principles of the experiments are three:

- students prepare to ‘teach’ others about ‘us’ and our (small) culture, of the school or community
- teachers plan the activities to ensure that the skills and attitudes of intercultural competence are stimulated and practised, as students teach others about themselves and use their discovery skills to find out about others
- students engage in ‘action in the community’ which is enriched by their international perspective and experience.

The same principles can be applied in projects which do not involve international partners. In a classroom project, a theme is chosen and teachers introduce ‘texts’ (of all kinds including video-recordings, website, still images, as well as written or audio texts) which are in the target language but showing how others see ‘our’ country/community and the theme chosen. If the theme is ‘recycling’ or ‘sport at school’ in the USA for example, students should see how these themes are depicted in Japanese texts of all kinds.

In the second phase, students produce their own ‘texts’, in the target language, which tell others how they see the theme themselves. In this case, the ‘others’ may be fictional but need to be a specific group - an imagined exchange group preparing to visit ‘us’ for example - e.g. a group of young people learning Japanese in Italy. This requires the skills and attitudes of intercultural competence. It also develops learners’ linguistic competence as they use their Japanese for a cognitively demanding task which is of affective significance; they are talking about themselves.

Following the third principle, students should present their work in the community. The community is both the school or university in which they work and the local community of parents and neighbours around the school or university. An ‘open evening’ would be such an opportunity. Further examples of projects and lessons for schools and universities can be found in Wagner et al. (2018) and more will be available later in Wagner et al. (in press).

5 Assessment - moving towards a solution

Assessment is self-evidently crucial and has become even more so as comparisons are made by

international organisations, notably the OECD, among countries. Assessment should be an integral part of teaching and, it has to be admitted, has not been taken as seriously as it should in teaching Intercultural Competence, above all because of the lack of satisfactory tools. In the world of business and commerce, there are many offers of tools to measure intercultural competence or sensitivity - the terms vary - as a simple internet search will show, but these are not appropriate for education systems.

There are however very recent developments which provide a way forward, the first of these being the *Companion Volume to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)* published in 2018 (www.coe.int/lang-cefr) Here the concept used is 'pluricultural competence' which is closely connect to plurilingual competence, and like other aspects of competence in the CEFR, is presented through descriptors at six levels. It is seen as a means of enriching the use of one's language competences and, in a new development, as a means of facilitating mediation between people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. For example, pluricultural competence is used to establish a 'pluricultural space' where exchange can be facilitated, and is described at B2 level as:

Can encourage a shared communication culture by expressing understanding and appreciation of different ideas, feelings and viewpoints, and inviting participants to contribute and react to each other's ideas.

Can work collaboratively with people who have different cultural orientations, discussing similarities and differences in views and perspectives.

Can, when collaborating with people from other cultures, adapt the way he/she works in order to create shared procedures.

Can support communication across cultures by initiating conversation, showing interest and empathy by asking and answering simple questions, and expressing agreement and understanding.

Can act in a supportive manner (Council of Europe, 2018: 121)

There is much more detail than can be presented here and there is much still to do to implement these ideas, but a valuable start has been made.

Similarly, in the USA, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), has produced its own descriptors for intercultural competence at different levels from 'Novice' to 'Distinguished'

(<https://www.actfl.org/publications/guidelines-and-manuals/ncssfl-actfl-can-do-statements>). Here are just two examples of aspects of intercultural competence, the ability to investigate and the ability to interact:

NOVICE
PROFICIENCY BENCHMARK

INTERMEDIATE
PROFICIENCY BENCHMARK

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

 <p>INVESTIGATE</p>	<p>In my own and other cultures I can identify products and practices to help me understand perspectives.</p>	<p>In my own and other cultures I can make comparisons between products and practices to help me understand perspectives.</p>
 <p>INTERACT</p>	<p>I can interact at a survival level in some familiar everyday contexts.</p>	<p>I can interact at a functional level in some familiar contexts.</p>

ADVANCED
PROFICIENCY BENCHMARK

SUPERIOR
PROFICIENCY BENCHMARK

DISTINGUISHED
PROFICIENCY BENCHMARK

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

<p>In my own and other cultures I can explain some diversity among products and practices and how it relates to perspectives.</p>	<p>In my own and other cultures I can suspend judgment while critically examining products, practices, and perspectives.</p>	<p>In my own and other cultures I can objectively evaluate products and practices and mediate perspectives.</p>	<p>INVESTIGATE</p>
<p>I can interact at a competent level in familiar and some unfamiliar contexts.</p>	<p>I can interact in complex situations to ensure a shared understanding of culture.</p>	<p>I can engage with complexity and pluricultural identities and serve as a mediator between and among cultures.</p>	<p>INTERACT</p>

The next steps, whether in Europe or the USA, will be to implement these new proposals and to evaluate their use. In future experimental work such as the Green Kidz project, we will have to

include systematic assessment using these descriptors. Similarly, work in ‘ordinary’ classrooms will need to take these new ideas into consideration.

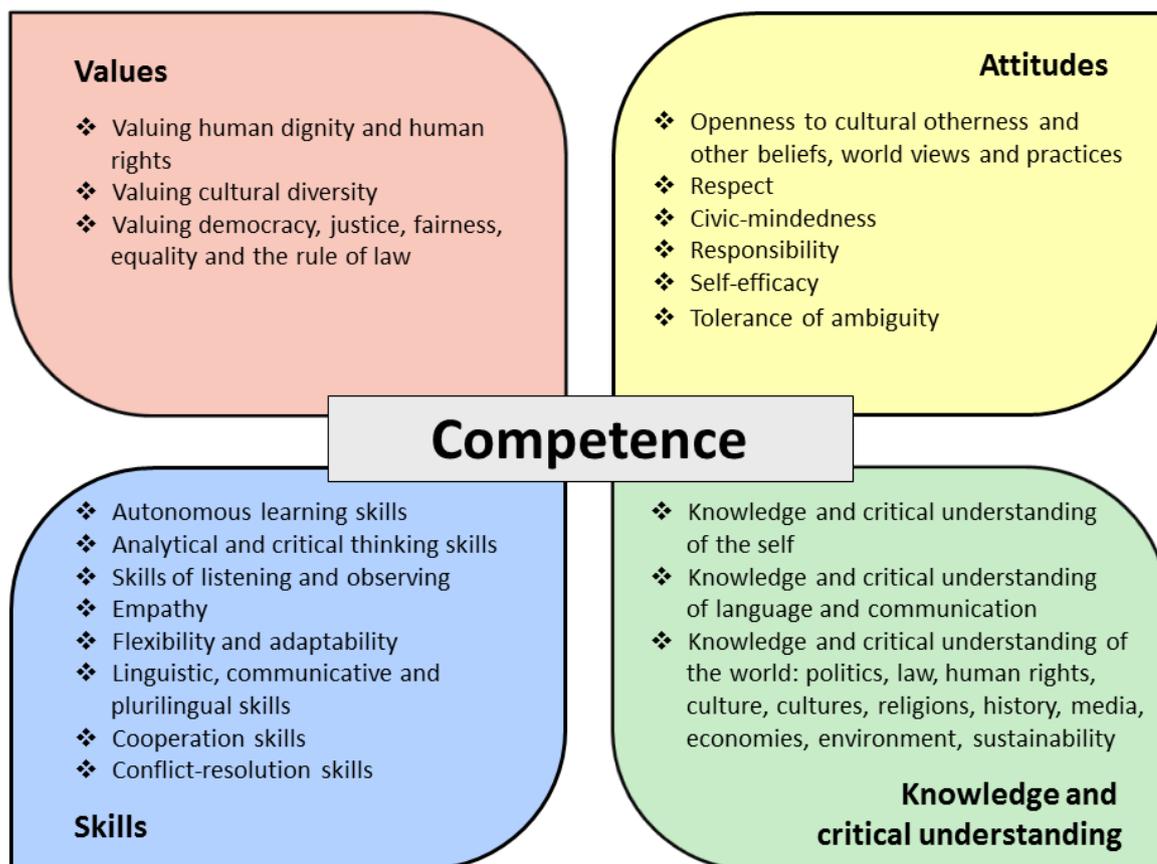
6 Language Teaching in (European) society

In this final section, I want to locate the kind of language teaching I have been describing in its societal, and not just its educational, context. Already, in the Norwegian statement quoted above, we saw an indication that one of our aspirations should be to link language teaching and learning to democratic citizenship across borders, and this is a sign, in Europe, of a worry that democracy is under threat.

One dimension of this threat is the presence of extremist groups who do not use democratic processes but violence to make their views felt. In this context, the need for ‘intercultural dialogue’ was first highlighted at European level in 2008. The European Union made this the Year of Intercultural Dialogue, and the Council of Europe produced a policy paper, a White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, entitled “Living Together As Equals in Dignity”.

One of the developments from this policy paper was to plan a new framework, similar to the CEFR, which would describe competence for intercultural dialogue and democratic citizenship, precisely the concepts used by the teachers of Green Kidz and other associated projects. The work had begun when the attack on the newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* took place in Paris. This and other terrorist actions brought the new framework to the top of the agenda for the Council of Europe.

Eventually, in 2018, a new *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (RFCDC) was launched (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/education>) . The RFCDC is, first, a model based on the analysis of many previous models, which identifies twenty competences needed in intercultural dialogue and democratic culture. These are represented in the icon of a ‘butterfly’:



There is, secondly, a volume of descriptors for these competences, at three levels, and thirdly there is a volume of articles advising teachers, examiners, curriculum designers and other stakeholders in education how to use the framework.

The framework is for use in all subjects, across the whole curriculum and in the whole school, beyond the formal curriculum. The teachers of any subject will be able to use the framework to plan and evaluate to what extent, while teaching their subject - be it mathematics, history, music or whatever - they are also teaching some, but not all, of the twenty competences. Language teachers will quickly find elements to which they already contribute but can, as in the Green Kidz example, be more explicit in their aims. Here are just some elements of the ‘butterfly’ which language teaching can develop:

- Valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law

This set of values is based on the general belief that societies ought to operate and be governed through democratic processes which respect the principles of justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law.

- Openness to cultural otherness and to other beliefs, world views and practices

Openness is an attitude towards people (...) or towards beliefs, world views and practices which differ from one’s own. It involves (...) willingness to engage with other people and other perspectives on the world.

- Linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills

(...) the skills required to communicate (...) with people who speak the same or another language, and to act as a mediator between speakers of different languages.

The significance of the RFCDC is that it will enable all teachers to think and plan explicitly to include these competences in their work, and to cooperate across the curriculum to ensure that all competences are taught at some point and are reinforced by cooperation. Above all it will allow teachers to be part of a systematic approach to teaching democratic competences and the competences needed for intercultural dialogue among separate groups in our societies. Language teachers are central to this in their ability to teach not just communication but interaction skills and the attitudes needed for creating harmonious relationships with others whether they are in another country or in our own. Teaching for intercultural citizenship as in the Green Kidz case develops, furthermore, an identification with others as learners from different groups work together on a common task. In short language teaching is much more than the common-sense activity focused on the exchange of information; it encourages enriched communication with a societal purpose.

7 Conclusion

In one sense, there is no conclusion because this work is unfinished. It is however work which already shows how language teaching can reach its potential as an education and humanistic subject, as well as being training in communicative skills. It also shows that the educational purposes are particularly important in contemporary societies where democracy and harmonious living are under threat.

One aspect of this unfinished business is how 'language teachers' will in the future perceive their professional identity. Rather than being teachers who focus on communication skills, they will need to broaden their focus and re-define their identity. This is just one of many questions which remain to be addressed.

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¹ This text is based on a lecture at the International Conference on Japanese Language Education ICJLE 2018 Dialogue for Peace, Venice, August 3-4, 2018. Some elements of the lecture have been presented on other occasions to groups of teachers in, *inter alia*, Italy, Norway, Azerbaijan and Colombia.