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SPECIAL ISSUE INTRODUCTION



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Language Teaching, Education for Democracy and Cross-curricular Connections

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ABSTRACT

This introduction to the Special Issue explains the geo-political context in which the contributions have been solicited and written and the policy response of the Council of Europe with which the contributions engage. The presence of war in Europe between Ukraine and Russia, both of which were members of the Council of Europe, is just one element of the threat to democracy. The Council of Europe had already begun work on a framework of reference for teaching democratic and intercultural competences in response to extremist violence in the 2010s and the model produced is all the more important in the current situation. The model – called ‘the butterfly model’ – lists the values, attitudes, skills and knowledge needed in a pluricultural and democratic Europe as a basis for work in education. In response, the articles introduced here demonstrate how the model can be used in the foreign language classroom and, in two further articles, this work is located in approaches to global education and to the education of teachers.

Keywords: democratic competences; intercultural competences; global education; teacher education; Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture

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Democracy is at risk. As we write this introduction, war is being waged in Ukraine after an invasion by Russia, and in European and many other media – but not all – the war is seen as a defense of a democracy by Ukraine and its allies.

Democracy was already at risk in another sense before this war began. In 2020, Foa et al., in an analysis of surveys of four million respondents between 1973 and 2020, concluded that ‘across the globe, democracy is in a state of malaise’ and that dissatisfaction with democracy rose from 1995 by about 10 per cent to 57.5% in 2019. On the other hand, all is not entirely negative, they say, and there is high satisfaction in some small, high-income countries in Europe (such as the Netherlands and Denmark) and ‘much of Asia has avoided the crisis of democratic faith affecting other parts of the world’ (2020, p. 2).

These ‘bright spots’ aside, it is evident that there is a need to educate about and for democracy in order to increase satisfaction. Or so it seems, since democracy is assumed by many people to be self-evidently the best form of living and governance. It is certainly true that ‘democracy’ is an attractive word. It appears in the name of many countries around the world and is proclaimed as a virtue even by those which, from a European perspective, do not appear to be democratic.

This raises then the question of what is meant by ‘democracy’, but this is not the place to discuss that problem at length. Let it simply be said, in a collection of articles around the Council of Europe’s *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (RFCDC), that the Council of Europe proclaims ‘democracy’ as one of its foundational concepts, together with ‘human rights’ and the ‘rule of law’ (www.coe.int). How the concept is understood is perhaps best seen not in terms of a dictionary definition, but through observation of how it is used. The Council of Europe published in 2016 a ‘Compendium of the most relevant Council of Europe texts in the area of democracy’ ([https://www.coe.int/en/web/good-governance/publications#{%2225569251%22:\[0\]}](https://www.coe.int/en/web/good-governance/publications#{%2225569251%22:[0]})). This document lists the texts under five headings:

- The functioning of democratic institutions (for example, free and fair elections, independence of the judiciary, good governance)
- Freedom of expression (for example, media independence, media pluralism and diversity, safety of journalists)
- Freedom of assembly and freedom of association (for example, political parties and trade unions, enabling civil society)
- Equality and non-discrimination (equality between men and women, non-discrimination)
- Inclusive societies and democratic citizenship (for example, citizens participation, participation of minorities, education for democratic citizenship).

Were the document to be updated, it would certainly include under the final heading the *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture*, which is now a flagship project of the Council of Europe.

The Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture

The RFCDC has its origins in the Council of Europe's work on language teaching, and it is all the more fitting that this special issue should focus on language teaching. On the other hand, the RFCDC has a wider curricular scope and ambition than just language teaching, and this special issue acknowledges that too, by including two articles on cross curricular connections.

The origins of the RFCDC in language teaching are, briefly, in Chapter 5 of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Learning, teaching, assessment* (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001), where language and communication competences are located in a wider framework of 'general competences': 'knowledge of the world', 'socio cultural knowledge', 'intercultural awareness', 'skills and know-how' (including practical skills and intercultural skills) and 'existential competence' (the phrase coined to cover attitudes, motivations, values, beliefs, personality etc.), 'ability to learn', 'language and communication awareness', and 'study skills'. These 'general competences' were not further analyzed and developed in the CEFR and, later, another project developed the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (AIE) (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/autobiography-intercultural-encounters>) to complement the focus on communicative language competences in the CEFR. By asking learners to reflect on and take social action as a consequence of an intercultural encounter, the AIE helps learners to analyze and evaluate their own intercultural competences and relate them to citizenship competences.

During the period of work on the AIE, the Council of Europe published its White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, entitled 'Living Together As Equals in Dignity' and a new project was established in 2013 to help educators to put the principles of the White Paper into action. An 'Ad hoc group on competences for democratic culture and intercultural dialogue' was set up to develop a framework analogous to the existing CEFR. This project then became a crucial element of the Council of Europe's response to the terrorist and extremist inspired attack on the French magazine *Charlie-Hebdo* in January 2015. In the new context created by this attack - a need to find new ways of creating inclusive democracy - it was emphasized that education should encourage and help young people to live in multicultural societies in a peaceful and inclusive way, and that democratic principles and practices are at the heart of this. The *ad hoc* group therefore pursued the work it had started, to create a model of intercultural and democratic competences which could be used in learning, teaching and assessment, just as was the purpose of the existing CEFR.

The model was developed by analyzing many existing intercultural and citizenship models. The final list of 20 competences was distilled from that analysis and the creation of descriptors followed a similar process to that used to produce descriptors for the CEFR. The list of competences was presented in four parts and, once created, it resembled a butterfly - the 'butterfly model' became its designation.

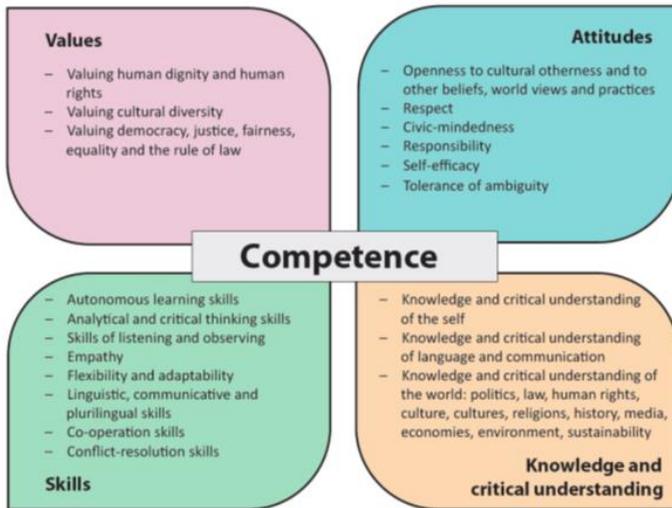


Figure 1. The 'Butterfly Model' (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 38)

Context – the Cultnet project for democratic education in the language classroom and beyond

This special issue arises from an international collaboration that aimed to exemplify how democratic education can be implemented in foreign language classrooms all over the world. The project entitled 'Cultnet RFCDC project – Principles and Practicalities' was initiated by Michael Byram and included participants from the research network *Cultnet: Intercultural Community for Researchers and Educators*, whose members share an interest in culture, intercultural communication and education (<https://cultnetintercultural.wordpress.com>). The group used the *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (RFCDC; Council of Europe, 2018) to develop theory-driven lessons and teaching activities that not only foster communicative competences but empower learners to become responsible citizens who possess the critical thinking skills to identify local and global issues and are willing to take action for a fair, sustainable and peaceful world. The approach builds on previous work in the field of Intercultural Citizenship Education (Byram, 2008; Byram, Golubeva, Hui, & Wagner, 2018) and is related to the pedagogical rationale of Intercultural Service Learning (Rauschert & Byram, 2017) and Global Education (Cates, 1990, Cates & Jacobs, 2006, Lütge, Merse, & Rauschert, in press). While it is not a novelty to foster democratic competences in learners, using the RFCDC as a theoretical framework allows educators to very clearly define the democratic competences they wish to integrate into their language classes. Besides implementing and thus also testing the RFCDC, two further principles were central to the project: a comparative dimension and interdisciplinarity. The projects were implemented in two or more education systems located in different countries, so educational and cultural contexts could be compared. In addition, connections between language teaching and other disciplines were established to demonstrate how cross-curricular planning enriches teaching, learning and assessment.

Structure of the Special Issue

The two parts of the special issue present how democratic education based on the competences included in the RFCDC can be implemented in the foreign language classroom and how cross-curricular connections enhance students' learning. The first part entitled *The RFCDC and Language Teaching Practice* showcases practical examples of civic engagement in international student collaborations, a democratic reflective syllabus and depicts how the RFCDC portfolio can be used to further develop and assess democratic competences. While the articles in section 1, which emerged from the Cultnet project mentioned above, approach democratic education from different angles, they all place special emphasis on the domain of 'values' as this competence area is rather unique in the RFCDC. Earlier models of intercultural competence (Bennett, 1986; Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006, Reimann, 2017) or intercultural citizenship theory (Byram, 2008) only commit to valuing cultural diversity but not to competences such as valuing human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Admittedly, as a document launched by the Council of Europe, the RFCDC incorporates European values as set out in the *European Convention on Human Rights* (Council of Europe, 2021). However, the values collated in the RFCDC are, for example, comparable to those of the *Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, 1948) and are therefore also supported by all those countries which are signatories. The articles in this special issue were written by scholars living and researching in eleven different countries – Argentina, France, Germany, Italy, Ireland, Japan, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom, USA, which confirms the applicability of the RFCDC competences in different contexts.

In the first article, "Educating democratically and intercultural competent citizens: a virtual exchange between university students in Argentina and the USA", Irina Golubeva and Melina Porto report on how an intercultural virtual exchange project that deals with traumatic experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic fostered students' intercultural competences and civic growth.

The second article, "Fostering democratic competences in learners: An interdisciplinary international experience" contributed by Petra Rauschert and Fabiana Cardetti, examines how education for democracy can be fostered through interdisciplinary intercultural citizenship projects. An example, in which mathematics students and TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) students from the USA and Germany collaborate in the production of a multimodal storybook serves as illustration.

These two virtual exchange projects are succeeded by the description of a democratic reflective syllabus, which is used in the EUFICCS (European Use of Full-Immersion, Culture, Content and Service) approach. Fiora Biagi and Lavinia Bracci demonstrate in their article "Democratic Reflective Syllabus in SLA context: in person, digital and hybrid experiences" how the Democratic Reflective Syllabus serves as a tool to reflect experiences gained in on-site and on-line service-learning programs.

The reflective dimension is spun further in the last article of this section, "Higher education student experience and a portfolio for developing democratic competences: values and reflections in an internationalized context". Jane Woodin, Paloma Castro and Ulla Lundgren present a study investigating how the use of an adapted RFCDC portfolio helps higher education students assess their democratic competences and become more aware of their own personal development towards intercultural citizens.

The second section of this special issue, *Cross-curricular Connections*, demonstrates how the RFCDC can be located in a wider context. Kip Cates elaborates in his contribution “Global education as a cross-curricular approach to language teaching for democracy” how foreign language education can promote democratic citizenship at the local, national and global levels by integrating foreign language teaching curricula, methods and materials with ideas, activities and resources from the field of global education.

The special issue closes with an article that responds to the need of holistic approaches to language education that go beyond one-off projects and aim at whole school thinking. Kristin Brogan, Marie-Christine Clerc-Gevrey, Jonas Erin, Silvia Minardi and Lea Stiberc present in their article “EOL – Setting up whole school policies and practices through a symbiotic approach of language matters” mechanisms and strategies to develop competences for democratic culture that involve all stakeholders of school life.

Conclusion

“What kind of society will our children live in tomorrow? An important part of the answer to that question lies in the education we give them today” (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 7). This concern raised in the preface of the RFCDC was also a driving force to compile this special issue and explore trajectories of democratic education in the foreign language classroom. Parker (1996, 1) once declared schools to be “Laboratories of Democracy”. While the term “laboratory” might evoke skepticism because of the experimental connotations, we would like to point to exactly this potential of education systems to bring about change. Schools not only prepare children for later life but they are living communities that mirror all facets of society. As such they provide room to encounter diversity, experience different forms of communication and take action to make a difference within the school community and beyond. In order to interact respectfully, develop responsibility and resolve controversies peacefully, they need to acquire the appropriate and necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. The articles in this special issue reveal that acquiring these competences is an active and complex process. If students are to tackle the challenges of today’s globalized world, we therefore need pedagogies that foster critical reflection and networked thinking. In the foreign language classroom, intercultural and cross-curricular approaches offer gateways to advance these goals, as foreign language skills allow learners to engage in dialog with speakers of other countries and cultures and thus encounter different vantage points. Multiperspectivity, a core component of democratic societies, can be further promoted through cross-curricular connections that merge ideas from different disciplines and so, *inter alia*, enhance students’ problem-solving skills. If the foreign language classroom integrates communicative, intercultural and democratic competences in this way, it will empower students to respond creatively to the demands of increasingly diverse societies and make responsible decisions about the future of planet Earth.

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