

# Didactic principles for foreign language teaching in primary schools

A new concept of foreign language teaching within the framework of intercantonal cooperation between the cantons of BL, BS, BE, FR, SO and VS

A document of the  
working group on framework conditions

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## **The relevance of this document**

The working group on framework conditions has, according to the project description, been commissioned to formulate “Didactic principles for foreign language teaching in primary schools”. The concept that is formulated here applies as a reference framework for the development work of all project committees. However, this version may be revised, and possibly added to, in the course of the development work and on the basis of experience in the project work, before its final approval by the steering committee.

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## 1. Starting point

The joint strategy<sup>1</sup> approved by the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK) on 25 March 2004, and the joint working plan for Swiss national coordination to implement the EDK's holistic language concept of 1998<sup>2</sup> plan that all primary school children will learn two foreign languages, at the latest from the third or fifth school year, and that mandatory competence levels will be established for the end of primary school. The six cantons of BL, BE, BS, FR, SO and VS along the German-French language border, which have expressed a preference for French to be learned before English, have joined up to form one region, with the aim of addressing the new concept of foreign language teaching together. The cooperation will be governed by an intercantonal agreement. The aim of the cooperation, according to the description of the intercantonal cooperation project, is to develop future foreign language teaching and to achieve the greatest possible degree of coordination in questions of didactics, timetables, teaching plans, teaching aids, teachers' job profiles, teacher training and further training, instruments of evaluation, language portfolios and communication.

## 2. The aim – functional plurilingualism

In accordance with the objectives of the Council of Europe and the EU regarding language learning, the most important objective of language learning is considered, by the EDK also, to be education leading to plurilingualism. Good linguistic and cross-cultural competence not only promotes mutual understanding and tolerance. It also increases personal and professional opportunities in a globalised world.

A person is considered to be plurilingual if he or she can communicate in more than two languages. Plurilingualism does not, however, mean that the command of the individual languages is equally good, nor that absolute perfection is required.<sup>3</sup> In primary school, it is a question of acquiring basic skills in the areas of listening comprehension, reading

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<sup>1</sup> A description of the strategy is available in German (and French) at: [http://www.edk.ch/PDF\\_Downloads/Presse/REF\\_B\\_31-03-2004\\_d.pdf](http://www.edk.ch/PDF_Downloads/Presse/REF_B_31-03-2004_d.pdf) .

<sup>2</sup> Which languages should be studied in Switzerland during the obligatory school? Report by an expert group set up by the commission for public education to elaborate a “whole language education policy” to the EDK (15.7.1998) <http://sprachenkonzept.franz.unibas.ch/ConceptE.html>.

<sup>3</sup> The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages defines plurilingualism as the capacity to use languages for the purpose of communication and to participate in intercultural interaction, where the individual is understood to be a social agent who has gradually changing competences in several languages and experience with several cultures. See also Europarat (2001): Gemeinsamer europäischer Referenzrahmen: lernen, lehren, beurteilen. Langenscheidt. [www.sprachenportfolio.ch](http://www.sprachenportfolio.ch) > ESP-Hintergrund > europäische Dimension > Übersicht des Europarates

comprehension, speaking (dialogue and monologue) and writing, and thus of developing **communicative competence**, which can be further developed life-long, depending on the individual needs.

Understanding and making oneself understood are central to foreign language teaching in the primary school. As long as the understanding is successful, then any mistakes that occur play a subordinate role. The technical term for this concept of plurilingualism is **functional plurilingualism**.

Plurilingualism is promoted by the development of language awareness, language learning strategy, working techniques, language comparisons and language reflection. Language and learning competences can be promoted and used in all school subjects. They increase autonomous learning and lead to more efficient learning.

### **3. Foundations I – language acquisition processes**

*Neuroscientific findings regarding language acquisition* allow a better understanding of language learning. As a basic principle, a distinction is made between unguided language acquisition (mother tongue or very early bilingualism) and guided language acquisition, such as, for example, what happens in school. Research has established that, if several languages are acquired, the second and further foreign languages are acquired more easily than the first, because language acquisition strategies can be drawn upon and links can be made with knowledge acquired from the first language and the first foreign language. Languages are acquired in a cross-linked fashion since, according to current knowledge, the brain does not distinguish between different languages neurobiologically. Neurobiological learning processes are influenced by emotions. A positive emotional relationship between the learner and the teacher and an encouraging teaching style promote learning processes and language acquisition.

*The development of the brain* depends on growth and on changes in the nerve cells; stimuli from the environment (input) are of fundamental importance here. The central principle is that further development in the brain always builds on what is already there. Thus a further learning step can only be taken if the basis for it has been created by what has already been learned. The language acquisition process in the brain does not primarily take place through conscious learning processes, but rather, the brain recognises rules and regularities in the mass of input. What is retained initially are general rules, regularities, patterns and connections that occur repeatedly in the input.

The *psychology of learning* sees the connection between a person's innate disposition to learn languages, and the influence of the environment in the *interaction*. Learners can exploit and extend the possibilities available to them if they are *guided and supported* by a proficient person. According to the theory of *constructivism*, subject matter can only be understood and learned if it can be linked with knowledge that the learner already possesses. Learning processes must thus be embedded in rich and authentic learning environments so that learners encounter knowledge that they can link with knowledge that they already have. The construction processes vary from person to person, so that the results of learning processes are never identical. The social context and the social interaction in learning are of paramount importance, as is the principle of self-organisation.

From the point of view of developmental psychology, the cognitive and motivational learning conditions, the general developmental changes and the individual characteristics according to sex, age, type of learner and cultural and social background also influence language learning. Individually adapted solutions that take into account developmental psychology factors must be found for children who are overextended by having to learn two or more foreign languages at school.

The language acquisition findings outlined above mean that a change in the didactic principles that have been applied in the past is required. This is explained in the next section.

## 4. Foundations II – didactic principles

Plurilingualism can be achieved when languages are taught and learned not in parallel, but in relation to one another, and when the findings of language acquisition research are taken into account.

This perception will have consequences for the training and further training of teachers, since it moves away from the concentration on only one language to a wider didactic understanding. The *didactic of plurilingualism*, a discipline whose development and study is by no means completed, is based on a cross-linguistic and interdisciplinary approach: Languages are not taught and learned in isolation. Rather, using comparisons, connections are made and a sensitivity to and reflection on languages and culture are promoted on any occasion that presents itself.

From a practical, teaching-related point of view, this means *inter alia* that:

- the main principles of the didactic of plurilingualism are known and shared by everybody,
- the aims and content of the teaching of the various languages are coordinated,
- everybody knows the teaching and learning materials of the languages taught at their school,
- competences, learning strategies and techniques are cross-linked, and
- the same evaluation criteria are applied.

From the curriculum point of view, it must be borne in mind that the didactic of plurilingualism interconnects and complements the individual language didactics of German, German as a second language (DaZ), French, English, Italian, Rhaeto-romansch and migrant languages.

The objective of plurilingualism can best be achieved when the potential of early foreign language learning is exploited. Young children are unbiased when it comes to foreign languages and cultures. They enjoy communicating in, imitating and reproducing other languages, and they have a strong interest in language activity. They still have the ability to learn the language in an unguided fashion and they are generally highly motivated.

Starting the teaching of a foreign language earlier means a lengthening of the learning period, but it also means that it is necessary to adapt the didactics to the various learning phases and developmental psychology considerations for foreign language learning. To take advantage of the *extension of the learning period*, it is necessary to organise the transitions between the school levels with great care and to ensure the continuity as regards didactic

principles. The development leading to plurilingualism requires coherence throughout all school levels.

Contemporary foreign language teaching focuses on the *competences* that can be developed by the learner. These are competences that we need in order to perform certain tasks (task-based learning). They comprise the sub-categories of comprehension (listening and reading), speaking (monologue and dialogue) and writing.

Language acquisition research assumes that language acquisition processes can be guided very little; everyone does not learn in the same way at the same pace. Learners construct their knowledge individually. *Internal differentiation* in teaching takes this fact into account through differing quantities of materials and differing degrees of difficulty of specific tasks or learning tracks.

Learners make mistakes. This cannot and should not be prevented. Mistakes are an important indicator of an individual's stage of language acquisition. A positive approach to mistakes has a positive effect on the self-confidence of the learner and on the learner's willingness to take risks and to use and further develop the language.

Language production and language knowledge are not assessed on the basis of deficits that still exist, but rather on the basis of the level of language already achieved. It motivates learners when their development is acknowledged and their progress documented.

## **5. Methods and instruments**

The objective of plurilingualism makes it necessary for the language teaching and learning methods to be expanded and reassessed as regards the didactic of plurilingualism, and for materials and instruments to be developed and adapted correspondingly.

### **Teaching and learning materials**

Teaching and learning materials will continue to play an important part in the foreign language teaching of the future. However, new materials are required that take into account the earlier start of foreign language learning and also the new didactic principles. They contain authentic language material that refers to the realm of experience of the learner and is appropriate to the learner's age, but that at the same time goes beyond the learner's own language and opens the learner's eyes to the world of the target language. These materials make individual activity and research on the part of the learner possible, and allow diverse social interaction. New teaching and learning materials support and extend the language acquisition process through horizontal cross-linking (as regards didactic elements, curriculum, communication and learning situations, evaluation materials) and through spiral consolidation by reintroducing linguistic and content elements in new contexts; they are learning-objective-oriented and do not follow a grammatical progression, but rather build and develop activity competences in the foreign language.

Newly developed language teaching and learning materials adopt the principles of the didactic of plurilingualism. They make possible the transfer of linguistic knowledge, language and learning experience, learning techniques and strategies, linguistic activity and language comparisons and reflections.

## Instruments of evaluation and assessment

Within the framework of the Swiss national school harmonisation project **HarmoS** of the EDK, both a competence model and also mandatory basic standards for the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> school years based on this model are being developed for foreign languages on the basis of the Common European Framework of Reference. They are to create orientation and transparency as regards communicative and linguistic aims in language teaching. The new curriculum is being developed according to the HarmoS guidelines.

The **European Language Portfolio (ELP)**<sup>4</sup> supports the appreciation of plurilingualism and extended self-evaluation and performance evaluation, content and action-oriented learning, vertical coherence between the levels, learning autonomy and exchange pedagogy. The ELP is a resource which allows learners to reflect on their own learning independently of the didactic support and to show their abilities in one or several languages in a European comparison. It allows the self-evaluation of language competences in the areas of speaking, comprehension and writing, and it facilitates the documentation of individual language products. The ELP should, in future, accompany the linguistic learning process from the time of starting school. From 2008, it has been available in three versions: for 7-10-year-olds, for 11-15-year-olds, and for young people from the age of 15 and adults.

**Lingualevel**<sup>5</sup> is a new scientifically-based instrument designed for the teacher. It allows teachers to better communicate the teaching objectives, to plan the teaching in a targeted and learner-oriented fashion, and to evaluate the linguistic competences of the learners transparently and on the basis of the Common European Framework of Reference. Lingualevel complements the European Language Portfolio in an ideal way.

## ELBE

Important elements of the didactic of plurilingualism are the methodological approach to linguistic and cultural encounters, to sensitisation to language and to language reflection, known as ELBE. The acronym ELBE stands for Eveil aux langues + Language Awareness + BEgegnung mit Sprachen und Kulturen. ELBE activities can be integrated into all school subjects and implemented from kindergarten to secondary level II. They stimulate interest in and draw attention to dialects, languages and linguistic phenomena and, through language comparisons, encourage reflection on language, the finding of differences and parallels, and the detection of language mechanisms and rules. The inclusion in ELBE activities of migrant languages represented in the class promotes an appreciation of pupils with other languages.

## Language exchanges

The best possible opportunity for language activity and linguistic and cultural encounters is language contact with people with the target language. Such contact can take a wide variety of forms: letter or email contact, contact using the Internet, mutual visits, meetings and exchanges of different types and varying lengths of time. Exchange arrangements in which a few children from one class spend a certain length of time in host families and go to the

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.sprachenportfolio.ch>

<sup>5</sup> See [www.lingualevel.ch](http://www.lingualevel.ch)

partner school, while at the same time, the same number of children from the partner school do the same in reverse, have proved to be very successful.

A stay in the target-language area and direct contact with target-language speakers entail, for a certain period, immersion in the other language, a new culture and a new environment, But they also foster independence, adaptability and perseverance. Exchanges provide extremely rich learning opportunities.

However, in particular, an exchange or language contacts mean that the learner discovers that the foreign language that is taught in school can also really be used. This is the best possible motivation for further language learning.

## **Bilingual school-subject teaching and immersion**

Bilingual school-subject teaching and immersion denote various different aspects of school-subject teaching in a foreign language. These create a “real-life situation“, such as occurs on a language exchange in an area with a foreign language. The emphasis is on the development of subject matter, with the language serving as a means of conveying the content; knowledge of the subject is evaluated and not the foreign language competences. Thus, interdisciplinary learning is possible, which follows the principles of the didactic of plurilingualism. Learners experience a need for words, concepts and structures in the target language so that they can grasp, formulate and communicate the content. Thus foreign language is acquired – partly unconsciously, as is the case in natural language acquisition, and partly consciously and purposefully. For this reason, even pupils who learn very little in traditional foreign language classes respond positively to these language teaching and learning methods.

The structuring of the methods in the classes depends on various external and internal framework conditions. Several models and variations are possible, depending on the location and personnel resources.

In bilingual school-subject teaching, the subject teacher teaches the content of the specific subject partly in the foreign language, providing the learners with linguistic support. The teacher plans the switches from teaching to foreign language and back according to the principle: “As much as possible in the foreign language, as much as necessary in the teaching language”.

Immersion denotes school-subject teaching that takes place exclusively in the foreign language.

Bilingual school-subject teaching and immersion lend themselves well to teaching at primary school level, but are also particularly suited to teaching at secondary level I, where young people have already had several years of course-oriented foreign language teaching and thus have a solid grounding in the comprehension and communication competences. Immersive teaching opens up new learning possibilities and new approaches to foreign languages for these young people.

Various pilot projects in Switzerland (VS, BE, GR) show not only that the language competences are improved with immersive teaching, but also that the structuring of knowledge in the school subjects is not affected. The evaluation of trials using immersive

teaching demonstrates at least as high a level of processing depth and quality of learning as in traditional monolingual subject teaching.

## **6. Framework conditions**

### **Profile of requirements for teachers: linguistic and methodological-didactic competences**

Well-qualified and motivated teachers are needed for the implementation of this new concept of foreign language teaching. These teachers need to have both proven high-level language competences and solid methodological-didactic competences.

In order to meet these raised demands, corresponding resources for teacher-training (basic training, further training and support/counselling) must be made available.

The foundations for professional teaching are very sound individual language competences. On the basis of the Common European Framework of Reference, precise, job-related linguistic competences are defined according to the teaching level. These competences are based on level C1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for primary school teaching, and level C2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for secondary school level I teaching. Transitional provisions are provided for. The above is subject to the decisions of the EDK.

Since the main task of the teacher is to support and encourage learners in their learning processes, they need a wide range of methodological-didactic competences (see Chapter 5: Methods and instruments), including linguistic knowledge of language mechanisms, language acquisition and error analysis didactics, and knowledge of how autonomous learning, language learning strategies and working techniques can be promoted.

The didactic principles described in Chapter 4 - in particular the didactic of plurilingualism and competence-orientation - form the basis for the methodological-didactic competences.

### **Vertical coherence from primary school to secondary level II**

It must be stated very clearly that bringing foreign language teaching forward to primary school level will have an effect on the school levels that follow. The foreign language reform's objective of making the learners at primary school level functionally plurilingual actually amounts to a paradigm shift. The focus is on linguistic activity, communication, learning, language reflection and the plurilingual and intercultural repertoire. Grammar, spelling and knowing the rules continue to be important, but they are only the means to the end of functional plurilingualism. Thus learning languages in school is the beginning of a life-long learning process.

Provisions must be made to guarantee the vertical coherence of the language learning. It will be imperative that the teachers at primary school and secondary levels I and II know the teaching materials, teaching methods, objectives and forms of evaluation used at the other levels, and that they understand language learning as a continuum. Agreements, clear provisions and structures for encounters, exchanges and planning are needed, as well as work on cross-linking in teacher training and further training. Within the primary school, it will

be the task of the heads of the school administration to shape the transition from primary school to secondary level I very carefully.

However, it is not only cooperation between those who are directly involved in this teaching at the various school levels that is important. All members of teaching staff must be convinced about promoting languages, on the principle of “All teaching is language teaching”, and networking needs to take place with the teachers who are not directly involved too, so that the quality of teaching can be raised in general. This will be particularly necessary in schools with bilingual and immersive teaching.

## **7. Conclusion**

The intercantonal project to bring forward and provide a new concept for foreign language teaching complies with the requirements of the EDK, the EU and the Council of Europe in terms of common language learning objectives and more coordination in their implementation. In the project, the foundations are being developed for the implementation of the objectives formulated together by the six cantons along the French-German language border, with the conviction that working together can, on the one hand, make the organisation and implementation more professional and lead to higher quality, and, on the other, that synergies can be exploited.

In order to achieve the overriding objective of *functional plurilingualism*, the project has established two pillars which will provide the basis for the newly conceived foreign language teaching: the framework conditions for the teaching organisation and work, and the establishing and clarifying of the didactic principles and the language teaching and learning methods derived from these.

## Appendix – Definitions

<p>Bilingual school-subject teaching</p>	<p>In bilingual school-subject teaching, the subject teacher conveys the content of the respective subject partly in the foreign language, thus providing linguistic support for the learner. The teacher plans the switches from teaching language to foreign language and back according to the principle: “As much as possible in the foreign language, as much as necessary in the teaching language”. Knowledge of the subject is assessed and evaluated, and not the foreign language.</p>
<p>ELBE E = Eveil aux langues L = Language Awareness BE = Begegnung mit Sprachen und Kultur</p>	<p>ELBE is a methodological approach that prepares for language learning and accompanies and interlinks the language teaching. ELBE activities (language sensitisation, language comparisons, language reflection) can be carried out in all school subjects. ELBE demonstrates an approach to implementing a didactic of plurilingualism.</p>
<p>European Language Portfolio (ELP)</p>	<p>The ELP makes it possible to record the current position of an individual’s language learning and intercultural experience, documents the individual’s personal language learning history, and accompanies the individual’s language learning processes both at school and outside school. The grid developed by the Common European Framework of Reference, which divides language competences into six levels, makes self-evaluation and outside evaluation possible. For Switzerland, three portfolios have been developed for three age-groups (Portfolio III → young people from the age of 15 and adults, Portfolio II → 11-15-year-olds; Portfolio I → 7-10-year-olds).</p>
<p>Functional plurilingualism</p>	<p>The focus here is not on the degree of perfection of the command of the language, but rather on the role of the language in communication. Different emphases are established and different competences are developed or required in the language to be learned, depending on the age, individual needs and demands, and on the professional or school situation of the learner.</p>
<p>Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)</p>	<p>This provides a common basis for the development of curricula all over Europe. It describes learning objectives and examines the role that communicative tasks have in language learning; it considers the meaning of the cultural context in which a language is embedded and it defines the competence levels that are an extremely useful aid in assessing learning progress, in terms of the learning process and also life-long. The CEFR was commissioned by the Council of Europe and a European Union Council Resolution (2001) recommended the use of it in setting up systems of validation of language competences.</p>

HarmoS	HarmoS stands for “Harmonisation in obligatory schooling”. The EDK project aims to harmonise subject matter (curriculum) and to coordinate organisation of compulsory schooling (uniform age for starting school, length of school year, length of mandatory schooling, establishment of result-oriented achievement standards at the end of the 2 <sup>nd</sup> , 6 <sup>th</sup> and 9 <sup>th</sup> years of schooling in mathematics, first language, foreign languages and sciences).
Immersion	Immersion denotes school-subject teaching that takes place exclusively in the foreign language. The main focus of the immersive teaching is the development of content, with the language serving as a means of conveying this content. Knowledge of the subject is evaluated. Foreign language competences are not evaluated.
Didactic of plurilingualism	See “Comprehensive Languages Concept” of the EDK (1998), proposition 8, which states that the teaching of all languages in the curriculum (including the local languages) must take place within the framework of set didactic principles. Languages are not learned and taught in isolation. Instead, many links are made, through language comparisons, language sensitisation and language reflection. This has an effect on the curricula, the teaching aids and the cooperation of the teachers.
Lingualevel	Lingualevel is a collection of practical instruments to assess and promote linguistic competences in foreign language teaching in schools. It comprises evaluation instruments, series of tests and corresponding achievement references for foreign language teaching of French and English for school years 5-9. An ideal complement to the ELP.
Plurilingualism	Plurilingualism means that an individual can communicate in more than two languages. Communication means that there is understanding with people with other languages in encounters and relationships. Plurilingualism thus does not mean that the individual must master several languages perfectly. It means that the individual has a plurilingual repertoire.

