Mercator: Creating a Future for Languages

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Mission and Goals
The Mercator European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning addresses the growing interest in multilingualism and the increasing need of language communities to exchange experiences and to cooperate in a European context.

The Mercator Research Centre is the successor of Mercator Education, which was founded in 1987 by an initiative of the European Commission. The research centre is based in Ljouwert/Leeuwarden, the capital of Frysln – a bilingual province of the Netherlands – and nowadays a department of the Fryske Akademy (Frisian Academy). Research of the Fryske Akademy is geared to the society, language and history of Frysln. The Mercator Research Centre focuses on research, policy, and practice in the field of multilingualism and language learning. The centre aims to be an independent and recognised organisation for researchers, policymakers, and professionals in education. The centre endeavours to favour linguistic diversity within Europe. The starting point lies in the field of regional and minority languages. Yet, immigrant languages and smaller state languages are also a topic of study. The centre’s main focus is the creation, circulation, and application of knowledge in the field of language learning at school, at home, and through cultural participation.

Successful activities of the Mercator Research Centre are the series of Regional Dossiers and the Network of Schools. Publications can be downloaded from our website.

Regional Dossiers
The series of Regional Dossiers meets the growing need for basic information on education in minority language settings. The dossiers present an up-to-date description of the position of a minority language at all levels in the educational system of a state. The Regional Dossiers are written by experts according to a fixed structure. Each dossier is updated once every five years. In this way the dossiers can also be used for comparative research. So far, some 40 languages of EU member states have been covered. In the years to come the series will be extended with the coverage of other languages: smaller EU state languages, minority languages of CoE member states outside the EU and beyond.

Network of Schools
The Network of Schools consists of more than 60 schools in 20 European regions where a minority language is taught. The goal of the Network of Schools is to create a platform for bilingual and multilingual schools in minority regions in Europe in order to facilitate the exchange of information and experiences. The Network of Schools is intended for schools at the pre-primary, primary, and secondary levels. These schools actively teach and use the minority language, or regional language, aside from the state language in the curriculum and they often teach English as a third language. In 2008 Mercator started to create a European Network of Teacher Training Institutes that are training future teachers for bilingual and multilingual education. This Network will not only create a platform for the exchange of information and experiences, but also function as the instrument to further development of common projects in terms of language transmission, adequate levels of language command, didactics and testing.

Research
The Mercator Research Centre is developing its research programme on the basis of the data collections available. Research activities focus on various aspects of bilingual and trilingual education, such as interaction in multilingual classrooms, language proficiency in different languages, teachers’ qualifications for the multilingual classroom, and the development of standards. The inventory of ‘Trilingual Primary Education in Europe’ (Beetsma, 2002) presents a number of case studies (Fryslén, the Basque Country and Finland) as well as a number of small scale initiatives in trilingual education. The results of trilingual primary schooling in Fryslén are encouraging: pupils have mastered Dutch equally well as other pupils, but Frisian better, and they speak English more easily (see: Van Ruijven & Ytsma, 2008). The model of trilingual schooling will be expanded to other schools and extended to a trilingual stream in secondary education. Research on trilingual education will focus on the actual results in terms of language command, but also on the longitudinal approach, the use of both Frisian and English as a medium of instruction, and on the implications for teacher training.

Whenever possible, research will be carried out in a comparative European perspective. On behalf of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (CLRAE) of the Council of Europe, Mercator has carried out the study ‘The Development of Minimum Standards on Language Education in Regional and Minority Languages’ (De Jager & Van der Meer 2007). With reference to the European Charter on Regional or Minority Languages the present situation of ten languages in eight countries has been
evaluated. The outcomes show a great variety in terms of time investment, teaching materials, teacher qualifications and the curriculum. This report will be used for the setting of minimum standards by the Council of Europe. Research results are disseminated through publications (on the website, on paper) and through conferences in collaboration with European partners.

**European Context**

In Europe there is a growing awareness of the value of linguistic diversity and the need to learn languages. The objective of the Council of Europe and the European Union is that all Europeans learn to speak at least two other languages in addition to their mother tongue. This not only refers to some of the major languages of Europe, such as English, French, German, or Spanish, but also to smaller state languages, immigrant languages, and regional and minority languages. All these languages together create the linguistic diversity of Europe. This characteristic diversity, however, needs to be protected and promoted at all levels. For example, the Province of Fryslân, the Dutch government, and the European commissioner for multilingualism all emphasise the relevance and importance of multilingualism. The Council of Europe stimulates language teaching and learning by means of conferences, projects and comparative studies, whereas the European Union has its own 'Integrated Lifelong Learning Programme' (2007-2013) that explicitly wants to promote language learning and supports linguistic diversity.

**Conferences**

The Mercator Research Centre organises conferences and seminars on a regular basis. Important themes for the conferences are: measurement and good practice, educational models, development of minimum standards, teacher training, and the application of the Common European Framework of Reference. The main target groups for the Mercator Research Centre are professionals, researchers, and policymakers from all member states of the Council of Europe and beyond.

**Partners**

During the twenty years of its existence, Mercator Education has cooperated with two partners in a network structure: Mercator Media hosted at the University of Wales in Aberystwyth and Mercator Legislation hosted at the Ciem Foundation in Barcelona. The Mercator Research Centre is expanding its network in close cooperation with a number of partner organisations working in the same field: the Research Institute for Linguistics of the Academy of Sciences in Budapest, Hungary and the Mälardalen University in Eskilstuna, Sweden.

**References**


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