



## BACKGROUND PAPER

# TRANSVERSAL COMPETENCES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

### 1. What are transversal competences?

As the expression implies, transversal competences are competences that do not relate specifically to the learning of languages or any school subject but are relevant across the spectrum of all subjects in school curricula. They are essential in enabling people to achieve their full potential, including in their education, their personal and professional lives and in their role as citizens of an increasingly globalised and unpredictable world.

Various other terms, such as 'soft skills', interdisciplinary skills, life skills etc., are used to describe the same or a similar range of competences. '21<sup>st</sup> century skills' is another term that became current in education policy in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, reflecting the need to ensure that young people were equipped to face the challenges of a fast-changing world heading into a new millennium. The Organisation for Economic Development's (OECD) [Competency Framework](#) (2014) features 'core competencies', which have since evolved into their Learning Compass 2030, while the European Union has developed and revised a reference framework of [Key Competences for Lifelong Learning](#) (pp 7-13). A major landmark was the publication in 2018 of the Council of Europe's detailed [Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture](#) (RFCDC).

Several frameworks make reference to [UN Sustainable Development Goal 4.7](#), which reads: "By 2030 ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development". For example, UNESCO developed a set of [Transversal Competencies in Education Policy & Practice](#), based on their own *Framework of Transversal Competencies* (UNESCO 2013: 18), and in 2019 UNICEF published its [Global Framework of Transferable Skills](#) which focuses on the needs of young people in the Middle East and North Africa (UNICEF 2019: 10-11).

The various frameworks do not all share the same aims or target groups. For example, as the name implies, the Council of Europe's RFCDC offers a specific "model of the competences that need to be acquired by learners if they are to participate effectively in a culture of democracy and live peacefully together with others in culturally diverse democratic societies" (volume 1, page 11) and is designed to support the development of these competences in primary and secondary education, while the OECD's Learning Compass 2030 "defines the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that learners need to fulfil their potential and contribute to the well-being of their communities and the planet", and is aimed more at preparation for professional life.

## 2. What is meant by ‘competence’ (or ‘competency’<sup>1</sup>) in the various frameworks?

In general, agreement is found across the frameworks that ‘competence’ involves an amalgam of values, attitudes, knowledge (and awareness and understanding), and skills (or abilities). In some frameworks, these elements of competence are exemplified and described separately. The definition of competence provided in the RFCDC is as follows: “[...] *the ability to mobilise and deploy relevant values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and/or understanding in order to respond appropriately and effectively to the demands, challenges and opportunities that are presented by a given type of context.* (vol. 1, page 32). However, as the RFCDC also points out: “*In real-life situations, competences are rarely mobilised and deployed individually. Instead, competent behaviour invariably involves the activation and application of an entire cluster of competences*” (page 33).

## 3. What kinds of values, attitudes, knowledge and skills are covered by the various terms and frameworks?

While the frameworks differ considerably in emphasis and orientation, there is considerable overlap between the competences focused on. The UNICEF *Framework of Transferable Skills* makes a useful distinction between groups of competences or, in UNICEF terminology, ‘skills’ (page 1):

- “**Foundational skills**, namely literacy<sup>2</sup> and numeracy, are essential and are the foundation for further learning, productive employment and civic engagement”. These ‘basic skills’ are included in some frameworks of transversal competences.
- “**transferable skills** allow young people to become agile, adaptive learners and citizens equipped to navigate personal, academic, social, and economic challenges; transferable skills include problem solving, negotiation, managing emotions, empathy, and communication and support crisis-affected young people to cope with trauma and build resilience in the face of adversity; transferable skills work alongside knowledge and values to connect, reinforce, and develop other skills and build further knowledge”. The competences implied here are frequently included or implied in other frameworks of transversal competences.
- “**Digital skills and knowledge** support the development of digitally literate children and adolescents who can use and understand technology, search for and manage information, communicate, collaborate, create and share content, build knowledge, and solve problems safely, critically and ethically in a way that is appropriate for their age, local language and local culture.” Again, ‘digital literacy’ and digital competences are specified in several lists of transversal competences.

Some frameworks also include ‘social and emotional learning’ (SEL), which refers to the development of some of the areas of competence mentioned above. SEL is “*an umbrella term to represent a wide array of non-academic skills that individuals need in order to set goals, manage behaviour, build relationships, and*

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<sup>1</sup> While some sources make a distinction between the meanings of ‘competence’ and ‘competency’, this is not significant for the purposes of this paper, except that the plural of ‘competency’ is more likely to be ‘competencies’ rather than ‘competences’.

<sup>2</sup> In the UNICEF definition, ‘literacy’ also includes oracy, the ability to use spoken language effectively.

process and remember information. These skills and competencies develop across our lives and are essential to success in school, work, home, and community.” <http://exploresel.gse.harvard.edu/about><sup>3</sup>.

Other kinds of competences also occur in some frameworks, for example:

- In the EU Framework ‘**entrepreneurship**’ competence is featured. This “refers to the capacity to act upon opportunities and ideas, and to transform them into values for others. It is founded upon creativity, critical thinking and problem solving, taking initiative and perseverance and the ability to work collaboratively in order to plan and manage projects that are of cultural, social or financial value”. (page 11).
- The OECD Learning Compass includes a cluster of three ‘**transformative**’ competences: “*Creating new value means innovating to shape better lives, such as creating new jobs, businesses and services, and developing new knowledge, insights, ideas, techniques, strategies and solutions [...]. Reconciling tensions and dilemmas means taking into account the many interconnections and inter-relations between seemingly contradictory or incompatible ideas, logics and positions [...]. Taking responsibility is connected to the ability to reflect upon and evaluate one’s own actions in light of one’s experience and education, and by considering personal, ethical and societal goals.*” (described in more detail in the [E2030 Position Paper 2018](#) (pages 5-6).
- ‘Democratic citizenship’ is the term applied to the wide-ranging set of competences described in the Council of Europe’s *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* referred to in 1 above, which includes such competences as tolerance of ambiguity and diversity.
- Although ‘consciousness’ is roughly equivalent to awareness, ‘consciousness for sustainability’, and ‘consumer consciousness’, which are referred to in the literature on TCs, can also be considered aspects of transversal competences.

#### 4. How are transversal competences dealt with in school education?

Until a few decades ago, the kinds of values, knowledge and skills now described in frameworks of transversal competences were not taught explicitly, although they may have been explicitly or implicitly referred to in descriptions of school aims and culture in curriculum documents. It was assumed at the time that transversal competences would be acquired by learners through interaction with teachers and fellow students in a range of subjects within their educational institutions, as well as through their upbringing at home. More recently, those responsible for educational policy in several countries have decided that, in order to ensure that all learners are equipped with the competences needed to meet the challenges of learning and life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such competences need to be embedded in school curricula and as part of pedagogic practice. It is also true that certain transversal competences, such as the ‘transferable’ competences described by UNICEF (dealing with different points of view, teamwork, flexibility, managing emotions etc.), are also - or should also be - developed during day-to-day learning activities, whatever the subject, and the same can be said of digital literacy. The ‘foundational skills’ - numeracy, literacy and oracy - are, of course, in different ways basic to the learning of any subject. It needs to be stressed, however,

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<sup>3</sup> This interesting website compares the ways in which SEL is dealt with across a wide range of frameworks.

that even if such transversal competences may be embedded in school curricula, there may be important gaps to be bridged between specifying and implementing curricula, and between implementing a curriculum and achieving the implied learning outcome.

Another very important issue is whether adequate attention is given to transversal competences in initial and in-service teacher education, and what kind of preparation and support is provided to help teachers cope with the additional challenges that they face in addressing transversal competences as part of teaching a given subject or in primary school classes.

### **5. Is it appropriate and feasible to work on transversal competences in the teaching and learning of foreign languages?**

There are good reasons for addressing transversal competences in foreign language lessons, and indeed in any teaching and learning that focuses on language and communication, especially the teaching of the language of schooling. Firstly, the values, areas of knowledge and skills integral to many TCs are related implicitly and explicitly to language and to culture. The EU Framework and the RFCDC both include plurilingual (or 'multilingual') and intercultural competences, the ability to understand and use language and to develop positive and understanding relationships in settings where people are from different language and cultural backgrounds. All of these matters were addressed in the seminal *Common European Framework for Languages* and developed in more detail in its *Companion Volume* (Council of Europe 2001, 2018), and they are also explored in the *Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures* (Council of Europe 2012). They are thus familiar to many language teachers and language teacher educators. Such competences can be addressed naturally in foreign language classrooms, and indeed in any classroom where there are learners from different language and cultural backgrounds.

A further reason for addressing transversal competences in foreign language teaching is that some competences are closely linked to language learning, for example understanding how different languages can be used as means of mediation to support understanding and learning, or how the way language is used can affect understanding and attitude. In many contexts in Europe students learn more than one foreign language simultaneously, which further facilitates the exploration of these issues as well as comparison and intercomprehension between languages and the development and awareness of linguistic and cultural pluralism.

The aim of foreign language teaching is that students should achieve functional competence in the languages concerned, but there is 'space' in foreign language classrooms to address these and other transversal competences because communication in these languages need not be confined to any specific range of topics and so can be designed to highlight selected transversal competences. On the other hand, teachers working with learners whose level of competence in the foreign language is elementary may initially find it difficult also to include a focus on transversal competences other than those implicit in any co-operative action-oriented learning (co-operation, teamwork, listening to different viewpoints etc.), but even the difficulty of language level can be overcome if use of the first language or language of schooling is encouraged at certain points.

## 6. Why is a think tank on the role of transversal competences in language education necessary?

The ECML working group believes that a think tank can enable all participants to:

- Gain a better understanding about which TCs are addressed in national curricula and how the selection is made, including which frameworks of such competences are referred to, and the rationale behind decisions.
- Gain insights into how existing frameworks support the integration of TCs in curricula and teaching materials.
- Based on examples provided by the group and participants, reflect on successful practice in this area, and compile a shortlist of some key issues for policy makers and language teacher educators to take account of.
- Identify whether, and if so how, the development of TCs is addressed in initial teacher education and continuing professional development, and how the ways in which teachers' and teacher educators' needs in this area working in this area might be further enhanced.
- Contribute to the design of a possible future ECML project focusing on transversal skills in foreign language education.

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