

D. Bergin

Framework for consultation on a foreign languages in education strategy for Ireland.

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Organisation: The views expressed below are my own and not necessarily those of the organisation for which I work.

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Raising Awareness

What measures should be undertaken to promote awareness, at national, community, enterprise and individual level, of the importance of language learning and to increase interest in and motivation for foreign language learning?

Methods of awareness raising:

Prior to an awareness raising campaign, it would be helpful to conduct targeted focus groups including a representative sample including young people, and older adults, employers, students, academics, psychologists and educators among others. One goal could be to note potential barriers to foreign languages in education.

In any eventual awareness raising campaign, I would foresee that such a campaign must involve some form of publicity, in schools, in communities (libraries, training centres, employment assistance programmes etc.), in businesses, and probably on national TV and radio.

The solution for increasing interest and motivation must involve making language learning easier (removing barriers), and providing incentives for doing so (for example, ERASMUS programmes at third level, strengthening existing town-twinning arrangements).

Features of such a campaign could include:

- Potential benefits of bilingualism and of learning additional languages (e.g. Baker, 2011; Bialystok, 2009; Lauchlan, 2014);
- Highlighting careers that can make use of these skills;
- How to start improving linguistic skills (e.g. WLPAN system used in Wales);
- The psychology of effective language learning: how to succeed in achieving various levels of language learning including fluency;
- Language learning is a highly social skill, and positive interactions at any level of proficiency must remain at the heart of any initiative.

Reference will be made in this contribution to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR). Whatever the disadvantages, the CEFR provides a starting point for comparison and goal setting with regard to language learning. Information could be provided on the levels A1 to C2.

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Supporting migrant languages in educational settings

How can we encourage our migrant children to become proficient in the language of their adopted community, while at the same time maintaining oral, written and cognitive academic language proficiency in their own mother tongue?

A high level of exposure to English would appear in most cases inevitable for the children of migrants living in Ireland. There are notable exceptions in 'closed' communities probably due to parents' own lack of skills with English. However, this contributor's anecdotal experience suggests that a lot of gains can be quickly made if such migrant parents encourage their children to become involved in local clubs or community events.

Cummins (1984) proposed that it can take between 5 and 7 years to develop a level of English where the child can reason with new concepts to the same level as in their first language, in other words achieve a conceptual/academic language proficiency (CALP). Therefore, time is needed and some allowances (and differentiation) need to be made for children for up to seven years. The question of relevance here is how to best support their English language development during that time. There have been some resources published in the Republic of Ireland on this topic. Materials are also produced by the national association for language development in the curriculum (NALDIC) in the U.K. NALDIC resources emphasize gradual progress and over-learning of various elements of English (e.g. use of prepositions is one of just three areas suggested to be covered by Year 2 pupils over the whole year). A national review of available materials and guidance on EAL instruction would prove very valuable to teachers and schools all over Ireland who find substantial numbers of children with EAL in their classrooms.

The second part of this section relates to the maintaining of the first language, or L1. Maintaining the L1 is highly desirable as it boosts the linguistic skills of the population and it can result in higher attainment for the individual pupil. Demie & Strand (2006) took the level of English proficiency into consideration and reported a slight advantage for 'fully fluent' pupils with EAL when compared with their monolingual counterparts in terms of their GCSE results. Therefore, we have good reason to encourage the maintenance of the L1 and the question is how may these skills be supported? One method that is currently occurring is **schooling in the home language**, which can help children to link concepts they have learned in school to concepts in their L1 and ensure overall better educational outcomes. For example, in Portlaoise, Polish and Latvian language schools run on Thursday evenings or Sunday (respectively) and can help construct this link between L1 and new concepts in English (L2). To this contributor's knowledge, these schools are organized by individuals within the Polish and Latvian communities themselves. It is quite possible that they are not supported by the Irish state to date in terms of provision of facilities or guidance on best practice to ensure optimal educational outcomes (e.g. 'good' leaving certificate results). If such community schools were supported with facilities and/or guidance on best practice, doing so would help achieve the goal of maintenance of oral, written and cognitive academic language proficiency in the children's L1.

A supplementary method, which is already being employed, is the establishment of more foreign language options for state examinations and the establishment of curricula for such courses.

Learning and teaching

How can foreign language learning be supported for students from post-primary educational settings and thereafter? You may wish to concentrate on one educational sector.

Foreign language learning can be supported by providing **meaningful opportunities** for students to use the languages they are learning. In post-primary school this may involve promoting **exchanges** (which usually occur over school holidays), but could potentially progress to attendance or visits by students to foreign schools. There may be opportunities to spend part of the academic year at a foreign school during the transition year or other feasible period.

The use of **language assistants** in post-primary and possibly primary schools. A scheme of foreign language assistants should be considered for secondary and possibly even clusters of primary schools. These are usually students studying for a degree who spend one year teaching in a country in order to develop their skills in the language they are studying. The foreign language assistants are usually involved in co-teaching with a language teacher at a particular school, in order that the students are exposed to the language of a native speaker and are motivated to converse with the assistant. Such a scheme, has been run successful for a number of years by the British Council in the U.K.

A potentially rich vein, that could be exploited, would be a **gap year** before university. Young adults (over the age of 18) could be supported in developing their language skills further in a foreign country before embarking on a degree-level course. The benefits of this system could be to raise the level of students with leaving certificate qualifications in languages (possibly elevating language ability, for example, from a B1 to solid a B2 in terms of the CEFR). The benefits of such a programme include:

- it would encourage more students to study other subjects (for example, Engineering) in conjunction with a language with which they felt they have a solid grasp;
- students with well-developed linguistic skills going into university are more likely to experience **meaningful** progression and study later on when taking part in an ERASMUS year or other study-abroad programme.

At university level:

- universities can support the language development of all students by providing **free access** to language courses for undergraduates and postgraduates to continue to build upon their existing language skills or to start with new ones (such a programme has been successfully run by Queens University in Belfast);
- universities continuing to promote ERASMUS and other **study-abroad programmes**, and developing further programmes in countries where priority languages are spoken, which in turn can raise the value of European and Irish degree courses.

Teacher Education

How can we ensure an adequate and ongoing supply of highly-skilled, professional teachers/trainers of foreign language at all educational levels to meet ongoing and emerging needs?

In addressing the problems posed in the area of teacher education, it can be helpful to distinguish between the qualifications of indigenous teachers and trainers of foreign language and the employment of native speakers to instruct in this area.

The **employment of native speakers**, temporary or otherwise, is a recognized successful strategy used throughout the world for the instruction in English language as evidenced by the rise and breadth of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) qualified teachers throughout the world. In Ireland, however, whereas native speakers do work in some contexts, there are barriers that prevent them working within the Department of Education and Skills, which would be counter to what we know works in teaching any skill: that you need to hear it from the experts. Whereas some native speakers have received qualifications through Irish universities to teach in secondary schools, the author posits that such instructors form a tiny minority of the overall language teacher population. The employment of native speakers in post-primary schools could produce a knock-on effect, in that it could have a 'raise-your-game' effect on the profession and overall instruction of languages. The Irish census of 2011 indicates that there is a large number of foreign nationals living in Ireland, for whom the likely priority European languages are mother tongues (German, French, Italian, Spanish or Russian speakers etc.). Incentives designed to encourage these residents to complete qualifications in teaching would possibly be necessary to increase the uptake of such courses among these populations. Such incentives could take the form of training grants or loans. These incentives would need to be attractive to EU nationals who may already be employed in Ireland and may have to be encouraged to return to further education to retrain. Below is listed 2011 census figures for residents by place of birth from selected countries (which would include individuals born abroad to Irish parents) in a key age range group of 25 to 44, see <http://www.cso.ie/multiquicktables/quickTables.aspx?id=cdd22>

Austria	343
Belgium	621
France	1131
Germany	2881
Italy	920
Spain	492

For indigenous (Irish) teachers, incentives again would need to be provided to ensure that they have adequate skills and continue to develop their language skills if required. **Re-examining the requirements** for language teachers and stating a basic minimum critical specification for teaching training could be one option. It could be possible to use degree status and/or qualifications based on the CEFR to fulfill these requirements.

Furthermore, existing teachers could be provided with incentives to improve their existing qualifications in language skills, e.g. C1 and C2 using the CEFR, degree or equivalent level qualifications are proposed as well as study visit schemes. Access to such professional development should be considered, as most opportunities to develop skills in teaching and language are confined to the largest urban areas, and in particular Dublin. **Specialisms**, such as a post-graduate diploma or Master's in teaching English as an Additional Language (EAL) and the instruction of foreign languages could be established. Critical components of such courses could include:

- the most effective teaching practices for language learning;
- stages of foreign language development;
- individual differences in ability and how this can affect learning;
- differentiation for individual differences;
- using multi-sensory teaching in language learning.

Assessment and qualifications

How can enhanced flexibility, choice and continuity in foreign language learning programmes, their assessment and accreditation be provided, particularly at Further and Higher Education?

In terms of qualifications, reference should be made to similar systems in other countries, and the Council of Europe's CEFR. It could be prudent to **liaise with national agencies** from respective countries who have responsibilities for the promotion of their language. Good **guidance** on language learning should be provided to students with a wide range of levels combined with realistic targets and starting points.

Assuring Quality

What measures should be in place to support quality assurance measures, evaluation processes and research projects and to provide a knowledge and evidence base for policy making in the area of foreign languages?

In addition to consultation with language promotion institutions, as stated above, collaboration with university research departments, for example, linguistic or psychology departments, could assist in the evaluation of pilot programmes and completion of research projects, which might include:

- Surveys of existing practice in Ireland;
- A literature review of successful language instruction (including best EAL instruction for schools);
- Evaluation of new initiatives and their outcomes on suitable measures (e.g. supporting Polish and Latvian community schools, schemes to improve teacher skills, the possible beneficial effect of employing foreign language assistants etc.) which could be presented in terms of project deliverables.

Supporting Multilingualism in Business and Society

How can we promote a multilingual society and support service providers, both public and private, in meeting emerging needs?

a) What role can the education system play?

This contributor proposes that the education system in post-primary schools would likely be limited in scope that it can provide to employers in this regard. Barriers could include that students need to be prepared for business first in their native language before they can adapt to use these skills in a foreign language. One exception could be for children with EAL using their native languages during work experience in an international company with connections to their country of ancestral heritage.

After completion of post-primary school education, there may be opportunities for young people to build on the links they have made through school initiatives promoting foreign contacts and networks. Likewise universities could further promote ERASMUS schemes by running classes at the home university prior to the exchange focusing on terminology used in specific fields. These courses could assist students greatly in ensuring a successful experience abroad. Government support to expand ERASMUS programmes would be beneficial. Other schemes that universities could establish include laboratory research assistant exchanges, other work experience abroad programmes, furthering existing visiting scholar programmes, and larger multi-national projects (such as EC-funded collaboration projects).

b) What role can employers play in enhancing the linguistic skills of their employees, particularly their Irish employees?

Employers could support employees in language learning by reimbursing course fees for approved institutions. The employers can decide which languages are of priority and the amount refundable on receipt of an exam completed or record of course attendance. For example, an International School in Belgium, for whom I previously worked, allowed employees to be refunded 100% of up to 1,250 euro in their first year of employment for language courses in French, German or Flemish (the three official languages of Belgium) and 75% of the cost of such courses after the first year of employment (up to 1,000 euro). The Irish Government could allow employers to offset these reimbursements against tax. Such monetary support might not be the only method through which employers can provide support though it is one practical example.

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The author recognises that this contribution relies not only on previous research but also partly on anecdotal evidence and personal hypotheses based on observations. I would welcome the opportunity to examine any of the proposals raised here and others either by further contribution to this public consultation or through further research of the area.

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