

## Response to “Framework for Consultation on a Foreign Languages in Education Strategy”

**INTRODUCTION.** There are compelling reasons why a National Languages Policy should be a central part of national strategic planning. A policy on “foreign” languages should be an integrated part of a full National Languages Policy. This note seeks to contribute to the discussion invited by the Framework for Consultation.

National Language Policies are driven by global trade and investment, by universal access to communications technologies, by multinational activities and by the international movement of labour – all factors with a strong influence on Ireland.

The first significant step to be taken by all State organisations is to cease referring to languages as “foreign”. Foreign implies alien and external and may condone unintentionally Anglophone monolingualism. English is, after all, “foreign” to some pupils in Irish schools. So is Irish. National policy should seek to make multilingualism a widespread intrinsic part of Irish capabilities. The statement in the Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030 (p.5) “Ireland is a bilingual State” needs to be amended. A public deletion of the word “foreign” would increase national awareness of the importance of languages to individuals and nationally.

In a National Policy languages should be referred to in other overlapping ways such as “community” languages, that is those of Ireland’s immigrant communities, and “strategic” languages, that is those deemed to be of particular importance to Ireland’s future and that of its citizens. “European” languages include Irish and English and the other 22 official languages of the EU 28.

**NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY.** A National Policy needs to address a number of issues which include:

- ❖ **English** is becoming the dominant world language. Ireland’s policy must aim at achieving the highest standards globally in English usage and creativity. It should address the global demand for excellence in English language teaching and culture.
- ❖ The **Irish language** policy requires a review in a multilingual context. The disconnection between the educational investment in Irish and its usage in society needs to be part of policy review.
- ❖ Ireland is enriched by the languages of its immigrant community, its **Community Languages**. National policy should seek to maintain that richness by new measures to ensure continuity of full language fluency in the children of immigrants. These languages include **Polish, Lithuanian, Russian**.
- ❖ All languages have their importance. National policy should seek to define a set of languages of particular importance to Ireland’s future, its **Strategic Languages**. It should also seek to outline the broad levels of competence required to match sectorial needs. A suggested list of Ireland’s future Strategic languages is: **German, French, Spanish, Mandarin, Portuguese**.
- ❖ National Policy should give consideration to an advocacy of the “EU 1+2” recommendation of phased multilingualism of mother tongue plus two other languages. Levels of competence related to abilities, length of study and CEFR would have to be taken into account. Public awareness of language importance would be enhanced by such advocacy.

**COMMUNITY LANGUAGES.** The languages of Ireland's immigrant community, its Community Languages need to be promoted in new flexible ways. Where these communities have themselves established schools or classes to promote language learning on approved international curricula by qualified teachers these should be supported by the State. ETBs should establish, in areas of larger population, the demand for new formats, eg Saturday Language School, for Community Language teaching. School collaboration should promote Community Language learning.

**STRATEGIC LANGUAGES.** Three of the Strategic Languages are introduced in Ireland at second level. Of the five Strategic Languages suggested above, French, with 15,000 entries at Higher Level in 2014 is the dominant one in the Irish second level school system, a dominance not supported by future economic predictions. German and Spanish, the other main languages, with 4,725 and 3,400 Higher entries in 2014 respectively, are at a lower level of popularity. Mandarin and Portuguese are largely absent from Irish schools.

- ❖ Two major centres, one for Mandarin and one for Portuguese, should now be resourced in two Irish Universities to initiate courses and to output Level 8 graduates and postgraduates at high levels of competency in the language, the culture and the economies of China/Taiwan/Singapore and Brazil/Angola/Portugal respectively. These centres would also output future teachers of these languages.
- ❖ Ireland's schools have enabled over the years many thousands to acquire Leaving Certificate qualification in languages, largely at Higher level. (In 2014 almost 37,000 passed either French, German or Spanish with 61.2% (22,610) at Higher level. Of those passing at Higher level about 40% were male.) Higher Education Institutions, ETBs, employers and the State should encourage the transformation of that achievement into a professional functionality, fluency and active language use.
- ❖ Higher Education should provide those with honours in one of these Strategic Languages to acquire an additional qualification in language competence related to the discipline of their degree studies.
- ❖ Employers should identify sectorial language competences and enable their acquisition. For example, where Strategic Language competence is important, apprentice formats at appropriate levels could enable the acquisition of that high level skill through work experience, including experience abroad, and study release. Language studies by employees should have strong employer support.
- ❖ Education and Training Boards should be given the task of providing Level 6 language courses to transform language dormancy in those with Leaving Certificate Strategic Language qualification into functional fluent use. This programme should lay emphasis on the Council of Europe Framework for Languages (CEFR) levels of language competency.
- ❖ Those ambitious for Strategic Language studies at primary level should be aware that it may reinforce French dominance. A regional approach to language promotion, through HE clusters and ETBs, with each region assigned a Strategic Language to promote, is one strategy that could address the unevenness of Strategic Language uptake.

**IRISH.** Irish distinguishes itself from other languages in Irish education in a number of ways. It is taught at primary and second level. It is compulsory. The NUI requires a grade D Ordinary level standard from Irish students, a grade achieved by 40,500 in 2014. It has, after English, the highest language entry – 45,250 in 2014. It is the only language with a third, lower, Foundation level. It has

the largest language entry, after English, at Higher level- 18,000 in 2014 - but the lowest proportion 40% taking that level. It has the lowest proportion of males 37.1% taking the Higher level. It is the language of instruction in some schools. In the 2014 Leaving Certificate about 8,500 subject applications were received to do examinations through Irish, 2.3% of entries. The largest subject was Mathematics which, with French and Biology, accounted for 48% of such entries.

The Irish language curriculum and assessments do not distinguish between first and second language learners. A major issue for language policy planning and investment is the disconnection between Irish study at school and its use in society. Census 2011 reported about 77,000 daily speakers with 30% of those in the Gaeltacht areas. This suggests that for thousands of those with Higher Irish that qualification is a dormant one. A major challenge is to transform that dormancy to active language utilisation and enjoyment. A prime issue is the Gaeltacht's strength and future.

**COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES.** Communication technologies are becoming ever more powerful, ubiquitous and accessible. They can affect language development in powerful ways:

- ❖ In most countries there are now more mobile phones than people. Mankind is connected in an unprecedented way illustrating the powerful forces towards the elimination of language barriers in communication and the growth of world languages. English is becoming the dominant world language with profound implications for Ireland.
- ❖ In contrast, modern technologies also enable scattered small language communities to communicate with one another. It is argued that, used appropriately, such technologies can invigorate languages otherwise endangered.
- ❖ Broadcasting, whether by TV, radio or internet, enables listeners to experience the elegance or misuse of language.
- ❖ Teachers are communicators. Technologies can powerfully assist in the teaching and learning of languages and the motivation of learners. A Language Policy should seek to exploit their full power in new forms of learning organisation.

A language policy needs to strongly include a policy on communications technologies. How can technologies be effectively used to promote the mastery of Strategic Languages? Can technologies assist in providing support for the development of Community Languages in a dispersed community of users in Ireland? A review of the Irish Language, its educational provision and its use in society needs to review Irish language broadcasting. Broadcasting through the English language in Ireland should be characterised internationally by the accuracy, elegance and creativity of its use.