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1. 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?

In recent years there has been a great emphasis on the importance of mathematics and this has influenced the relative importance that students attach to other subjects. It is important that the DES asserts the equal importance of language proficiency. A high profile campaign in the media and in schools highlighting the importance of languages is needed to balance the mind-set which has become established among parents, students, school authorities and in the community as a whole.

Maths and Sciences are currently seen in Irish society and in the educational system as the areas which students need to prioritise. Languages are often viewed and chosen merely to satisfy entry requirements to Third Level Institutions. Careers Guidance Counsellors need to realise the importance that the acquisition of foreign languages will have in the career opportunities available to students in the job market. Many of our young graduates will unfortunately emigrate to gain employment. The acquisition of a foreign language will automatically increase the number of job markets that they can access and many of these are closer to home than the distant countries often chosen because they are English-speaking. Principals and Careers Guidance Counsellors must, therefore, be targeted and encouraged to promote a more enlightened and realistic view of the practical value that fluency in a foreign language can bring.

In many schools students with Special Educational Needs are not offered the possibility of studying a foreign language or are encouraged to drop this language in favour of support hours. While support hours are undoubtedly beneficial the automatic assumption that languages will prove the most difficult and be the least useful subject is very detrimental to the overall perception of languages in the school community.

School exchanges and visits remain the preserve of the more affluent student despite schools' attempts to keep costs down. Other European countries provide subsidies for such educational trips and exchanges through local government. A very small contribution, similar to that provided by French authorities, would make a huge difference to the number of Irish students able then to witness at first hand the attainability of fluency in a MFL and the importance of same as a life skill. The experimentation with European Classes (on the lines of the French model) with extra tuition in MFL could enhance the perception of languages as something worthwhile and prized.

The level of complacency at national level, both in the public and private sectors, as being a monolingual nation only speaking English influences the nation as a whole and therefore the educational community. Government ministers and European deputies should lead by example and equip themselves with the language skills needed to effectively interact with their European and International colleagues. Some language institutes and embassies reward the attainment of exceptional marks in our State Examinations. Not all do and, in any case, this does little to raise the profile of language learning. If the DES, however, were to organise more visible and attainable levels of language achievement in every year at

second –level this would raise the profile of languages. Languages should be seen as a skill and not as a superfluous add-on.

Studies of the major businesses operating in Ireland or seeking to employ Irish people should be commissioned to ascertain exactly how important MFL are in the workplace. Companies will tell anecdotally of the necessity to bring in native speakers of the foreign languages because they cannot find applicants with sufficient language skills. The results of these surveys should be communicated annually to secondary schools and Third Level Institutions. It is too late for students to discover this when they are in the job market.

The DES in conjunction with the different embassies of the foreign languages commonly taught in secondary schools should organise regional information days to show students how critical a tool a MFL is. Companies which require employees with MFL and Third Level Language Departments should also participate.

The European Language Portfolio is not used in the majority of Irish secondary schools and the syllabi for Junior and Senior Cycle have not been updated since the 1990s. While Language Course Committees have met sporadically over the last few years there has been no real engagement with the partners on the ground. The review of the Senior Cycle Syllabi in Modern Languages (which was shelved without real notice) was essentially a modification of the existing syllabi in these languages and did little to revolutionise the way these languages would be taught or assessed. A real effort must be made to garner the opinions of the educational partners on the ground. The interpretation of a few sample schools' experiences does not constitute consultation. There is still no oral component at Junior Level and the DES's reluctance to organise the assessment of this in line with current procedures means that many language teachers do not really target this until Senior Cycle.

There is a common perception among students that it is extremely difficult to score an "A" at Higher Level MFL Leaving Certificate. Even students who are quite fluent with an ability to manipulate the language with ease tend to stumble when faced with the outdated and cumbersome questioning in the Reading Comprehension Section (30% of the overall mark). When review of the Senior Cycle in MFL resumes it should not proceed with the slightly modified draft document produced for consultation 3 years ago but ask, instead, what type of language learner we want to emerge from our secondary schools at the end of 5 years tuition in MFL. The NCCA has a duty to meaningfully engage with the other partners in education to decide on the profile of the learner. The decision in the last (suspended) review of the MFL to relegate the teachers' associations to course committees, which had very little influence on the real discussion, should be changed.

While a lot has been said about the importance of diversifying the languages taught in our secondary schools we should not make the mistake of no longer learning the languages of our closest EU neighbours. Instead, like our fellow Europeans, we should build on these languages to acquire others.

2. 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?

The increased use of the European Language Portfolio with qualified teaching time allocated for the achievement or completion of the different stages in the acquisition of the language of their adopted country is to be recommended. Many of these children need encouragement to present for examination at Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate Examinations. However, many of these examinations, such as the Leaving Certificate Paper in Lithuanian, are antiquated and only exist at Higher Level. We need to lose the assumption that oral fluency in another foreign language means being able to cope with complex language tasks and comprehensions. As many of these children have very little contact with the country of their birth efforts should be made to sustain what oral and written fluency they do have. Community schools in particular should include language "maintenance" in its extra mural classes. The availability of native speakers when dealing with parents of students from another language area should be organised, even on a shared basis among schools. Many parents from other countries have never acquired a working command of English, unlike their children, and find school information meetings and parent-teacher meetings very difficult. The complexities of our educational system can therefore, present huge difficulties and hamper the close relationship with the school which is a necessary part of their child's progress. A summary of our educational system and examinations should be made available in the key languages. Such summaries exist in other government departments and functions such as TV Licence Inspection.

3. 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.

The decision of many Third Level institutions to eliminate the need for a foreign language as an entry requirement for certain courses has led to a dramatic decline in the number of second-level student studying foreign languages at Senior Level. School records now show an increasing number of those who do sit the Leaving Certificate in a foreign language not attending classes in same in their school but attending private "grind" classes in order to attain the minimum grade to satisfy entry requirements. Schools are at times almost complicit in this with some schools having almost half of their students not officially doing a foreign language in the school.

The very particular type of assessment used for MFL at Leaving Certificate dictates the type of learning that goes on in second-level classrooms. Even those teachers who seek to be more progressive are frequently put under incredible pressure by students and parents to "teach to the exam" and to confine themselves to grind-school methodologies. As a result Third Level Language Departments have found that by the end of Term One in Third Level it is often difficult to identify the language student who has performed well in Leaving Certificate in a MFL.

Ireland welcomes a very small number of Foreign Language assistants every year and for many rural schools this is the only contact that students will have with a native speaker. Many rural schools only receive an assistant once every 7 years so entire classes will leave school without ever having contact with a native speaker. This unacceptable situation will have to be reviewed. If the number of language assistants cannot be increased in the short term perhaps more flexibility could be introduced into the system, for example a language assistant assigned to a school for half a school year, or a language assistant shared between 2 schools, or the availability of a language assistant in an area to be available to other schools for a fixed number of days during the school year.

Teacher Exchanges are a very valuable experience and have been found rewarding by many teachers. Schools need to facilitate the participation of language teachers in these programmes. Too often disruption to the timetable is cited as a reason for a teacher not to apply.

Third Level Language Departments also need to realise the standard of the “typical” second-level student on graduating to Third Level. More consultation between the two levels would show their new tutors that students are usually not fluent and still need extensive help with the more complicated demands of grammar. This continuation of the work done at second-level should be a priority for the first year at least in Third Level.

Despite the requirement to study a MFL as part of alternative Leaving Certificate Programmes (LCVP, LCA) in many schools this is acknowledged on paper only. If timetabled, the hours allocated are frequently given to another subject. Students taking these alternative Leaving Certificate Programmes frequently do not take the language component of their course seriously and schools fear the consequent failure statistics which encouraging them to sit the MFL examinations will produce.

It is important that students sitting these courses be targeted by the DES and be reminded that the usefulness of knowing a MFL is not the preserve of Third Level students. A survey of second level students carried out in one school five years ago asking students which professions in particular needed to learn MFL put builders and craftsmen at the top of the list. Although the demise of the Celtic Tiger has reduced the numbers having to learn English on our shores, it is now the turn of our young people to learn MFL to allow them to a larger number of countries in which to seek work.

4. 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?

The initial training of teachers of MFL in our Third Level Institutions remains very limited and inadequate. Much more emphasis must be put on Oral proficiency and fluency. Students must spend a worthwhile period of time in the target country and should be encouraged to work as language assistants. Although Ireland only offers a limited number of these in the target countries new ways should be explored to allow more student/ newly-qualified teachers to learn from this experience.

The language skills of the practising teacher must be maintained and developed on a regular basis. Unfortunately the extra hours to be worked under the terms of the Haddington Road agreement have meant that language teachers no longer attend the CPD presentations organised for them. The Teaching Unions have reached an agreement with the DES that 5 hours of individual CPD will qualify for inclusion in the Haddington Road hours agreement. This needs to be increased so that the CPD entered into by the MFL teacher will enhance both his language skills and his expertise in the language classroom. The DES should recognise and certify those teachers who do participate in ongoing CPD so that the initial

teaching qualification is not seen as the only qualification in language teaching that the MFL teacher will receive in his 40 year career.

With the demise of the Linguistics Institute some decades ago, Ireland became one of the few European countries not to have a centre for the promotion and development of language-learning. The CPD programmes and courses provided by centres such as the Cavilam in France are a vibrant and effective way of enhancing the professional development of language teaching in a country. While the Education Centres throughout Ireland do provide some CPD it is on an ad hoc basis and, where languages are concerned, without any pedagogical continuity. It is crucial that Ireland establishes at least one such language centre for teachers of MFL so that CPD can be planned with a proper pedagogical input and made available to all teachers. Accreditation would then be more standardised and would prove useful to schools and teachers seeking to improve the quality of the language-teaching they were offering their students.

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?

Studying a language at Third Level is very often within the context of an Arts Degree. More courses should offer the possibility of doing a MFL as part of the course. Students participating in Erasmus courses abroad should ensure that the participating colleges abroad are proactive in promoting the development of the students' language skills and do not assume that attending the public or private college is the same as improving language skills. Many students on Erasmus programmes are not offered language classes until some months after their arrival. Much stricter supervision of the programmes being offered needs to be done by the Irish Third Level Institutions.

Students who studying a MFL at Third Level should be given the opportunity of doing a short course in another language, possibly one which has historical, business or cultural links with the target country of the first MFL being studied (example French : Arabic)

5. 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?

It is crucial that teachers of MFL are involved in all curriculum development and are not relegated to the powerless course committees of the NCCA as is currently the case. Language teachers are at the forefront in maintaining and developing the presence of these languages in Ireland and their expertise and experience should be formally sought and valued.

It is important to ensure that the assessment procedures put in place are a real and vibrant assessment of the type of learning that we want to take place and do not limit and stultify so much of the student's classroom experience of languages as is currently the case. New curricula should not be a mere reworking of what was last reviewed in 1995 but something that reflects the world we now live in and the language demands that will be made of our students. The Language Associations, as the representative voices of these teachers, should be involved in all developments and negotiations. Within the DES there should be a clear understanding of who is responsible for what. Too often in recent years it would appear that the NCCA, the SES, the Language Inspectorate and the DES genuinely do not know what the other bodies are doing. Requests from the Language Associations for clarification and advice have been met with a lack of knowledge as to what is happening. Clearer lines of

command and communication must be established, maintained and communicated to teachers and to their Language Associations.

Grades awarded should be based on merit and not on pre-set national percentages.

Accreditation should bear in mind European standards so that qualifications will be recognised abroad.

Schools are often reluctant to release teachers as oral examiners and this has led to the situation where some of the examiners available are not orally proficient and at times make mistakes which are apparent to the students.

See also response to Teacher Education Q.1 paragraph 3

(With the demise of the Linguistics Institute some decades ago, Ireland became one of the few European countries not to have a centre for the promotion and development of language-learning. The CPD programmes and courses provided by centres such as the Cavilam in France are a vibrant and effective way of enhancing the professional development of language teaching in a country. While the Education Centres throughout Ireland do provide some CPD it is on an ad hoc basis and, where languages are concerned, without any pedagogical continuity. It is crucial that Ireland establishes at least one such language centre for teachers of MFL so that CPD can be planned with a proper pedagogical input and made available to all teachers. Accreditation would then be more standardised and would prove useful to schools and teachers seeking to improve the quality of the language-teaching they were offering their students.)

6. 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?

As has been said above teachers are at the forefront in making language skills available to children. The DES must make its support of languages and of the role that schools play in promoting same visible to the school and the wider community.

See response to Q. 2 above

(The increased use of the European Language Portfolio with qualified teaching time allocated for the achievement or completion of the different stages in the acquisition of the language of their adopted country is to be recommended. Many of these children need encouragement to present for examination at Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate Examinations. However, many of these examinations, such as the Leaving Certificate Paper in Lithuanian, are antiquated and only exist at Higher Level. We need to lose the assumption that oral fluency in another foreign language means being able to cope with complex language tasks and comprehensions. As many of these children have very little contact with the country of their birth efforts should be made to sustain what oral and written fluency they do have. Community schools in particular should include language "maintenance" in its extra mural classes. The availability of native speakers when dealing with parents of students from another language area should be organised, even on a shared basis among schools. Many parents from other countries have never acquired a working command of English, unlike their children, and find school information meetings and parent-teacher meetings very difficult. The complexities of our educational system can therefore, present huge difficulties and hamper the close relationship with the school which is a necessary part of their child's progress. A summary of our educational system and examinations should be

made available in the key languages. Such summaries exist in other government departments and functions such as TV Licence Inspection.)

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

Some companies already provide language courses in their company libraries. Where there are overseas partners or branches short language stays should be encouraged as part of employee professional development. Employees should be made aware of the importance of fluency in another MFL for intricate business negotiations and relations.

7. Other Comments

Please add any other comments you may have below that you believe are relevant to the development of the Strategy.

The French Teachers Association of Ireland (FTA) is delighted that this consultation document has been launched and welcomes the engagement of the new Minister for Education in this issue.

Funded as a TPN we are the only body organising and assuring CPD for second-level teachers of French in Ireland. We take seriously our role to promote and improve the teaching of French as a second language in Ireland. We have always been active in our representations in the Franco-Irish Pedagogical Committee (FIPC), The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), The Subject Association Representative Group (SARG), The Post-Primary Languages Initiative (PPLI) and the International Federation of French Teachers (FIPF). We really hope that this consultation document will soon lead to a vibrant and open discussion on the place of foreign languages in Ireland with the full participation of all the partners involved in that process. We remain at your disposition for any further clarification or contribution and look forward to working with you in the near future.

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National Executive

French Teachers Association of Ireland.