

## **PART 2: QUESTIONS FOR CONSULTATION**

The Department of Education and Skills is drafting a Foreign Languages in Education Strategy. The views of stakeholders are being sought to inform the development of this Strategy. Outlined below are a number of key questions. You are invited to provide your feedback on each question. There is also a space at the end of this template for any other more general comments you may wish to make that are relevant to the issue of foreign languages in education. It would be important to note that the submissions received will be available for general distribution.

Name of respondent: Marie-Therese O'Carroll

Organisation, if any, whose views are being represented:

I am writing on my own behalf, but I consider myself to be representative of those who have availed of everything this country has traditionally provided for those interested in language acquisition, in my case, French.

I am a recently-retired English and French teacher with 33 years of experience in a small, rural mixed secondary school, the last decade of which saw me as Deputy Principal. I have also worked for 25 years with an Irish-based residential language course provider, as a course Manager, Programme Director and language programme designer. I have also delivered workshops and seminars to various branches of the French Teachers' Association, including an address at their National Conference.

My own schooling in French is as follows: at primary level, I engaged in lessons at the Alliance Française; at post-primary I did a month exchange in France; at university level I worked 2 summers as au pair; following my HDE, I worked a year as a language assistant; I did a term as a teacher exchange and have done 2 summer courses under the aegis of the FrancoIrish Pedagogical Committee.

Email address:

## 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?*

Foreign languages should be around us, clearly visible and in our world view. TV programmes should be in their original languages, (*Version originale*, as the French would say), with subtitles; foreign language books and newspapers should be prominently displayed, not hidden away in some corner of the shop; significantly, for teens, the pop music of their foreign cohorts should be played on TV and radio; teen magazines should emphasise the foreign-language speaking of pop stars and not contribute to the general belief that everyone speaks English and you can only make it big in the English-speaking world; newspapers and news programmes need to open our eyes and ears to non-English speaking personages, politicians, celebrities, sportsmen, etc. Our politicians, celebrities, sportsmen, etc., should be shown speaking various foreign languages.

In short, foreign languages should be HERE and not THERE.

## 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?*

Proficiency in English, in this case, among the migrant children is a function of the migrant society's attitude towards the dominant culture. Those societies and communities that favour integration will naturally become proficient as they will socialise with English-speaking children, read and watch English, and eventually seek work in English-speaking sectors. Where the community is closed and inward-looking, this will be less likely, as these children will integrate only with their own members, will socialise only among their own cultural group and will often end up working primarily among speakers their own mother tongue, with little or sporadic contact with English speakers. To attempt to change this would involve "interfering" in the cultural paradigm of that group, a forced integration, shades of the "ugly American." Do we want, or can we justify, that? Spock, of Star Trek fame, allowed that the "needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, and even the one," but this is a dangerous doctrine as who determines the "many," because with just the slightest shift of the lens, we can all find ourselves among the "few." Have we learned nothing from our attempted, failed, enforced integration of members of the Travelling Community? *We* integrate, *you* assimilate.

I would never buy into anything because it *bettered* the country, or the society or even my cultural group, nor would I expect anyone else to do so. But show me how it will help me, and it's likely I'll get on board. If we want these kids to become proficient in English and to develop their own mother tongue to academic standards, then *we* have to show each one what's in it for him/her.

### 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.*

Post-primary sector:

It depends on how serious we are about this matter, and are we willing to put our money where our mouth is. Immersion works, the famous *bain linguistique* of French classes. Students who go abroad on exchanges or who partake in residential foreign language courses here in Ireland show improvement in language skills acquisition. We need to institute, develop and fund school exchanges, similar to teacher exchanges already in place. They exist in some schools but only during TY, as they'd "interfere" with "real" work, or in individual situations, with no meshing of what was learned into the general school environment, so while it remains of benefit to that individual student, the linguistic landscape of that school or community hasn't changed. We need to broaden the scope, focus on integration within the whole school, and make it a national initiative. Use the French system for the *classes de neige* to encourage uptake, with very vigorous financial support for families, encouraging reciprocity as much as possible to keep costs down. Everyone would need to be on board, and that means the PE teacher, the Science teacher, the Hons Maths teacher even! This would be education through the medium of a foreign language, NOT just that specific foreign language.

### 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?*

Listen, if there's jobs, people will train for them. The DES would have to assure employment for x number of graduates in y number of languages, and then assign them, similar to the way the DES assigned guidance counsellors to schools a decade ago, to schools or shared schools depending on the number of pupils. When it is a question of small uptake, too small to warrant the allocation of even a shared teacher, then on-line lessons will answer. That's the sort of situation that Skype and video conferencing were developed for!

## 5. 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?*

Now that, I can't answer in detail because it is dependent on too many variables at the moment. At its simplest I'd approach it like I'd approach any module design: decide what it is I'd like the pupils to know at the end, establish where on that learning curve the kids are currently situated, decide what I'd need to do, both content and methodologies, to bring that learning objective about and what steps would be needed to make it happen.

This is an approach I've always favoured; I don't look forward and imagine what the future will bring. Instead I put myself in the future and "look back" on how I got to where I "now" am. It might appear semantics but it isn't, as the focus changes from "imagined" outcomes/ends to "required" means. It works. The attitude is pragmatic instead of aspirational. That's a powerful place to be, mentally speaking! One question: are we all in the same place, looking back together?

## 6. 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?*

I regret I can offer little here other than my belief that the scope should be as broad-based as possible, multinational rather than national, multilingual rather than monolingual. I don't think any foreign language should occupy a favoured position, nor should we entertain arguments that something wouldn't suit a certain language. I would argue an *all for one* approach, because one foreign language is as good as another.

## 7. 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?*

Schools literally have to continue opening kids' minds to the greater world out there, showing them that their community is a piece of a larger jigsaw. Outside of History and Geography, what subjects regularly refer to other places and people, particularly non-English-speaking places and people? Why aren't we making more of the contribution made to Mathematics by Indians and Arabs, to Science by Poles and Germans, to Business by the Koreans and Chinese? The classroom has to become more a "window of wonder" through which kids can look out onto and pass into realms of possibilities, and less a funnel down which we cram education in the manner of fattening a goose, so that it is more fit for slaughter. The laptop/tablet, with connectivity, has to become the new textbook. It is the only tool capable of allowing this

paradigm shift. There are obvious financial implications, but surely less now than yesterday, and assuredly, less tomorrow than today.

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

Use it or lose it. Are employers exploiting to the maximum the linguistic skills at their disposal? I don't think so. How many Irish websites have the option to view in a different language? Speaking of, how many schools? At an even simpler level, where are the equivalent to the "English spoken here" signs in shops and businesses?

## **8. Other Comments**

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

I was disturbed to gather that the proposed strategy intends to start at the post-primary level instead of the primary. Allow me to recount an anecdote: I met a young girl many years ago, Áine. Her mother was French, her father Irish and they lived in Dublin. Áine was 8 years old and could speak English, French and Irish fluently, albeit at an age-appropriate level. She had never been taught any language formally. Since birth, her father spoke Irish to her and she to him, her mother French and her friends and teachers English. To Áine, these were simply the different ways she spoke to these different people. By waiting until post-primary stage I fear we are attempting to teach languages to pupils whose minds have already begun to lose that elasticity and receptiveness so essential if language acquisition isn't to become a chore. I would argue that the solution is to change our perception of foreign languages as subjects to be taught and learned in school; instead a language should not be an end but a means, and instead of teaching languages we should use languages, different ones and from the earliest stages of childhood, to teach other things. We don't teach a child how to use a hammer; we give them the hammer and teach them how to hammer a nail. Use French, German, Italian, Mandarin, Arabic, Russian and so on to teach PE, Art, Dance, song first, then move on to the 3 Rs. If the home is speaking the mother tongue and it is reinforced by all the media out there, don't let's worry about it; focus on the other languages. Nobody would get away with saying their 3 or 4 year old can't learn English; why then do we allow parents of 13 and 14 year olds to say they are useless at French or German? It's because we recognise that by waiting that extra decade before starting foreign language acquisition the pathways of the child's mind have indeed become fixed and immovable and for some, an increasing number it seems, they simply cannot get out of that rut, and remain locked in that single path of thinking and expressing themselves while their more flexible and malleable colleagues hop, skip and jump from highway to byway as suits them and their needs. I'll allow waiting until the post-primary level before starting is better late than never, but surely that's not the way forward and shouldn't be enshrined in a new strategy? Let's start with the young who don't know one language from another and couldn't care less; let's simply use languages as the tool of instruction so that in the future the question won't be "Do you speak a foreign language?" Instead it'll be "How many languages do you speak?"

Thank you for taking the time to complete this template. Your feedback will help to inform the development of the Foreign Languages in Education Strategy

Please email this template to [foreignlanguages@education.gov.ie](mailto:foreignlanguages@education.gov.ie) , or post it to: Tim O’Keeffe, Department of Education and Skills, Marlborough Street, Dublin 1