ASTI Submission

Foreign Languages in Education Strategy

October, 2014

Introductory Observations

The consultation on foreign languages in education strategy is timely not only in the context of the Government's Action Plan for Jobs but also in the context of broader social and political changes in Ireland, in the European Union and at global level. Language is an intrinsic dimension of citizenship. As noted in the 2005 NCCA Review of Languages in Post-Primary Education, *"language policy and planning (or the lack of these) can result in language being a significant determinant of who has access to political power and economic resources and life chances and who does not: in other words, who experiences the full meaning of citizenship and who does not."* (1) Moreover, the benefits of plurilingualism* extend well beyond the economic and include social, cultural and cognitive benefits for both individuals and society. Framing the rationale for a languages policy exclusively in terms of economic imperatives will not best serve an increasingly diverse and mobile Irish society into the future.

While a strategy for foreign languages in education is particularly important, our national experience of an exclusive reliance on schools to sustain proficiency in the Irish language should make us particularly sensitive to the limitations of this approach. The challenge of meeting the EU Barcelona objectives of *"mother-tongue-plus-two"* requires a broader approach. (2) This argument is well made in the 2005 EGSFN Report on Future Skill Needs which emphasised the urgency of developing a better understanding of Ireland's language capacity and undertaking an analysis of the needs of learners, and the state, in the contemporary economic, social and cultural context. (3) Ireland needs to develop a national language strategy which addresses all aspects of language education and skills development across society in both native and foreign languages. The Royal Irish Academy has made a cogent case for such a policy in its 2011 Report on a National Languages Strategy. (4) The 20-Year Strategy for Irish Language is a good example of what the latter might look like in terms of vision, policy context, specific objectives, phased implementation and areas for action. (5) It also contains concrete proposals for building a stronger Irish language base through digital technologies.

Note: Given its specific focus on second level education, this submission focuses on questions relevant to second level education.

Question 1: Raising Awareness

There is arguably a need for more research on students' attitudes and motivations towards language learning. Up-to-date research evidence in this regard could identify future awareness raising strategies. The STEM initiatives in recent years are particularly instructive in this regard. Most of these initiatives are underpinned by empirical research in the Irish context; have engaged the stakeholders – most importantly, young people; have addressed gender issues; and have developed innovative multi-stakeholder outreach activities which are available nationally and are adequately financed. (7)

The recently published ESRI longitudinal on leaving school in Ireland provides important insights on young people's decision-making in relation to subject choices. (8) Guidance Counsellors are identified by students as being influential, but particularly so for students from lower socio-economic groups. Education policy must reinstate the Guidance Counselling service as an ex-quota provision to the school. Moreover, inservice should be provided to Guidance Counsellors to ensure greater understanding of fast-changing labour markets; the increasing importance of languages in careers and the opportunities provided by new vocational educational and training developments.

A common theme throughout much of the research literature around STEM is the importance of parents' influence on students' subject choices and career aspirations. This literature should be revisited to see if similar parent-focused strategies can be deployed for raising awareness of the importance of language learning.

Question 2: Supporting migrant languages in educational settings

The language learning needs of migrants are complex. They need targeted supports to enable them to acquire the majority language and simultaneously need supports to retain their own mother tongue language/s. From the perspective of the ASTI, neither set of needs are currently being adequately met. Supports for teaching English-as-another-language – EAL - have been reduced by successive austerity budgets. Indeed, during the economic boom, the quality of supports for EAL was not optimum. Training was not provided in any systematic fashion to either EAL or mainstream teachers. In most instances, many of the former were not experienced teachers but rather were new entrants to the profession and to whom atypical teaching duties were – and continue to be - routinely allocated.

The complexity of migrant students' language learning needs is explicitly addressed in the 2010 National Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy. The latter notes that "*(migrant students') acquisition of communicative language may mask a deficit in academic language skills that are needed to succeed at school*". (9) The recommendations in the Strategy should be revisited as a matter of urgency as two consecutive PISA studies provide clear evidence that migrant children are performing significantly below their peers in reading literacy whereas the difference is not so significant for the other domains, including the new domain of digital reading in 2012. (10)

The case for supporting migrant languages in second level settings can be made on economic, social, cultural and equality grounds.   This case is acknowledged in the Framework for Consultation which re-states the need for greater diversification of foreign language provision. Apart from a rigid and high pupil:teacher ratio, the key challenge in this regard is the supply of qualified teachers. The Department of Education & Skills should be mindful of the resistance which the proposal to introduce a short course on Chinese Culture and Language has engendered among second level teachers. Much of this resistance arises from concerns about the qualifications of persons who may end up teaching this short course.

Finally, the literature on the educational achievements of migrants underlines the importance of context: many migrant children come from homes where English is not even spoken as a third language. Policy needs to address parents' language learning needs: SOLAS and the ETBIs have a key role in this regard. Indeed, a recurrent theme in the Consultation and similar documents is the need to utilise the rich resource constituted by the 200 foreign languages that are spoken daily in Ireland. Through their community and adult services in particular, the ETBIs are particularly well-placed to develop this untapped linguistic resource. A plurilingual cultural environment can only be conducive to formal language learning in schools.

Question 3: Learning and Teaching

The ASTI notes that this question refers only to second level and beyond. This is an unusual omission given that primary and pre-school are examined in the Framework document. If the Government is serious about a language policy, it cannot – without loss of credibility – ignore the huge body of research evidence demonstrating the importance of the first ten years of a child's life in establishing an orientation towards, and cognitive capacity in, language acquisition. Language learning must be supported for our very youngest children to give them the best opportunities to become competent and confident learners in primary education and beyond.

At the time of its termination, the Modern Languages in Primary Schools' Initiative was being implemented in 15% of primary schools. As noted in the Framework document, this decision was justified on the grounds of curriculum overload and lack of capacity to extend it to other schools. It is now time to revisit this decision. In consultation with the stakeholders, the DES must develop a sustainable policy to extend a similar initiative across all primary schools, following a review of the strengths and weaknesses of the MLPSI.

At second level, while the NCCA had commenced a review of languages in the curriculum, this process has stalled largely due to the commencement in 2009 of the review of the junior cycle educational experience of students. The ensuing Framework for Junior Cycle remains a subject of dispute between the teacher unions and the Department of Education and Skills. Having said that, the new specifications for all languages will contain a much needed focus on oral and aural skills: the latter will form part of the overall achievement of the student at the end of the three year programme. This is a very exciting development but it will require the provision of a range of supports to teachers, some over an extended period of time.

The 2013 European Survey on Language Competences: School-internal and External Factors in Language Learning provides a good comparative database on factors impacting on students' language learning. It noted that while there is wide variation across countries, in general, students´ perceived difficulty level of lessons, their perception of the usefulness of language learning for entertainment and the frequency with which they watch movies in the original version explains achievement. In addition, in most countries, students´ perceptions of their parents´ knowledge of the foreign language have a positive effect in students' achievement. Among the most important school factors that impact students´ attainment, it found that the earlier the onset of language learning the higher the attained language proficiency. (11)

An under-appreciated constraint on more active learning methodologies across all subject areas is the frequently poor quality of school accommodation. High pupil teacher ratios and a lack of funding for maintenance and extensions means that many classrooms are physically over-crowded which renders active learning methodologies such as group work, paired work, using digital media, etc., very difficult.

As regards using ICT to support language learning, many teachers complain that they can only access the computer room once a week at most. The Department has concluded a consultation process for a digital strategy for schools which one would hope would address the ongoing infrastructural deficiencies in ICT in schools.

The STEM experience should, as suggested earlier, serve as a model in terms of identifying supports for enhancing students' learning, The STEM project has now an exciting range of partnerships involving educational, state and employer bodies which target factors such as awareness of career opportunities; promoting students' enjoyment of science; making science relevant to everyday life; taking part in regional, national and international projects such as Maths Week, etc.

Indeed it must be said, that teachers experience a certain cynicism when on the one hand, schools are criticised for not producing students with adequate levels of proficiency in foreign languages while on the other, languages have remained perhaps one of the most under-invested areas of the curriculum. For example, there hasn't been sustained support to mainstream the Post-Primary Languages Initiative, despite the evidence as to the challenges faced by schools produced by the Initiative. The latter include teacher supply; sustaining language teachers' skills and oral proficiency; increasing the language choices available to students, including at senior cycle; creating student "demand" for languages. Underlying all of these factors is the rigidities imposed on curriculum choice by a high and inflexible pupil:teacher ratio. The Report of the Expert Group on non-permanent provides some recommendations as to how schools can better manage their staffing levels. (12) Direction must come from the Department to enable schools start to share teaching resources and are incentivised for doing so.

Submissions to this consultation process from the subject associations for languages contain many rich insights and recommendations for improving teaching and learning. Many of the former have recommended greater use of the Foreign Language Assistant scheme: given the increasing focus on team teaching as a model of teacher learning, the Department should take active measures to encourage schools to engage in this and similar schemes. These submissions note that many education ministries subsidise exchanges programmes for language students. There is no reason why a creative approach cannot be taken in the Irish context to this really powerful means of language learning. Funding for such projects is a particular challenge in schools serving mixed and/or disadvantaged communities.

Question 4: Teacher Education
Quality in education is highly dependent on the quality of the teaching profession. While entry standards to the profession are high, sustaining teachers' skills and motivation is the key challenge for education systems. (13) Curriculum change alone will not bring about pedagogical change. The latter is the key to transformative educational change and must be acknowledged as such. Teachers need to be supported to become the lifelong learners that a modern quality education system needs. The current model of three or four day's out-of-school inservice training is no longer enough. The latter must be significantly supplemented by in-school opportunities for peer learning through tried and tested models such as mentoring, team-teaching, coaching, peer-learning. Moreover, subject department planning cannot be artificially separated from these collegial activities. Time is the primary resource in this regard: schools do not have capacity to release teachers from classroom teaching to enable them to engage in the kind of powerful learning inherent in above activities.

 The Teaching Council has initiated preparations for a Framework for continuous professional learning. As regards the CPD needs of language teachers, it would be helpful to conduct research to obtain their views. For example, study visits abroad and school exchanges are very valuable but are not always appropriate depending on individuals' and school factors.

With regard to teacher education, a number of developments offer opportunities for consolidating language teachers' capacities and funding should be made available for research in this area. The former include the commencement of the two-year Professional Masters in Education in 2014 with an extended period of student teacher placement and Droichead, the pilot induction programme. Both developments offer significant opportunities for building up a data base on the learning needs of language teachers.

References

1. **NCCA** *Review of Languages in Post-Primary Education,* 2005 (p.1)
2. *EU* Council Barcelona *Presidency Conclusions, 2002*
3. *RIA* *National Languages Strategy,* 2011 (p.7)
4. *Ibid (p.13)*
5. **Government of Ireland** *20-Year Strategy for Irish Language 2010 – 2030,* 2010
6. **European Commission** *The European Survey on Language Competences: School-internal and External Factors in Language Learning*, 2013
7. **Accenture** *Powering economic growth: attracting more young women into science and technology,* 2014. This report is a good example of a policy strategy for raising STEM awareness among girls.
8. **ESRI** *Leaving School in Ireland: post-school transitions and the Irish recession*, 2014
9. **DES** *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning for Life: the National Strategy to improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011- 2020*, 2011 (p.64)
10. **ERC** *Learning for Life: the Achievements of 15-year-olds in Ireland on Mathematics and Reading Literacy and Science*, 2009 2012
11. **European Commission** Joint Research Centre *European Survey on Language Competences: School-internal and External Factors in Language,* 2013
12. **DES** *Report To The Minister For Education And Skills Of The Chairperson Of The Expert Group On Fixed-Term And Part-Time Employment In Primary And Second Level Education In Ireland,* 2014
13. **OECD** *A Teachers' Guide to TALIS 2013, 2013;* **OECD** *International Summit on the Teaching Profession: Teacher Quality, 2013*