

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

Name of respondent: John O'Grady

Organisation, if any, whose views are being represented: (I'm a primary teacher in an urban DEIS band 1 school, and have reasonable confidence that I reflect many of the views of colleagues, but have no mandate to speak for the staff)

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?*

Children have a natural fascination about language and languages. Even the very young delight in 'big words' and words from other languages. Their natural motivation to learn – their sense of wonder – can suffer, of course, when demands, especially daily demands, are made on them to perform. Nevertheless, my experience has been that once language(s) is introduced to them in a playful and purposeful way they are eager to respond. Then, once they've 'caught the bug' they are happy to continue in the learning environment.

## **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?*

Children playing with other children is the natural and most effective educational environment because the learning proceeds almost as a by-product of curiosity and basic communication. If the (native) children are encouraged to adopt a migrant child into their group(s) then the work of teachers such as myself is made vastly more easy. Also, teachers should not expect verbal communication from migrant children too soon: speaking in class can be a demanding task for any child and speaking in a foreign (though native-for-'us') language is so challenging that time must be allotted for confidence to develop. Placing helpful and supportive pupils beside the newcomer will play a key role in easing the transition from the strange to the familiar. Also, introducing elements (words, phrases, customs, feast-days, etc.) from the migrant child's mother culture into the overall class can be hugely beneficial in making that person feel at home, welcomed, valued. The teacher has the key responsibility here, though ICT can be used by children, and the newcomer if at all possible can be encouraged to participate (correct the locals, teach new terms, explain, and even introduce family members to the class). The younger the children are the more likely that a natural, easy and relatively uncomplicated transition will take place.

### 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.*

Of course, the best support is when the child enters post-primary with a willingness to learn a foreign language because she/he has already been exposed to it. Such a child often thinks she or he has a deep knowledge of the language already but, at least, the battle to introduce this language in a positive, accepting way need not be fought and won; the child is already caught by the language.

There may well be a special role for the primary school and Early Start sectors here. Bringing in senior migrant-students into these sectors might ease the acquisition of 'our' language for them; the language of the young children is below the level of their peers and so the demand made of them is not as great as when with those peers. That they will be accepted so readily by the young children may also increase the motivation of the migrant-students to learn our 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?*

One begins with the least demanding role and, with judicious continuous professional development at least, engages the young teacher while providing her/him with the necessary resources to pass on an enthusiasm for and some knowledge of some other language – I suspect that there will be a breadth of languages introduced in this way, even if *this* school cannot provide *that* language.

For instance, before the DES aborted the modern languages project, our school had a native Spanish speaker teaching Spanish to our 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> classes. Usually, these were either qualified or trainee teachers from Spain who ultimately planned to teach English in their native Spain. The children were not going to be fluent after a two-year exposure perhaps once or twice a week, but they were all enthused, introduce themselves, could count, say the colours, cook a little, etc. They had a pride in what they had achieved. One of the remarkable successes that I observed was the occasional child who, weak in the general curriculum, shone in this new language in which all were beginners.

## 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?*

Specifically on this area: I am not sure, especially in the short term. But, in the long term, especially if there are small but solid beginnings in the primary sector, the enhancement of educational opportunity through increased language capacity in young adults will happen organically, without too rigorous an evaluative structure. When students are observed utilizing the resources of other languages – because they offer new ways of thinking, conceptualities, authors, texts, contacts – we will know that we have been successful in integrating languages into language (and thinking) *per se*.

## 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?*

Sorry, but I have strong views on this. The DES had a programme in at least some primary schools – our DEIS school needed it more than most as part of the problem with areas of social disadvantage is their isolation and ghettoization, in which children and adults are not exposed to a broader, richer cultural experience that can be presumed for most in middle-class and affluent areas – and it was working well; what I experienced was wonderful for our children. It also had the advantage of chipping away at the stigmatization of Gaeilge that has long blighted Irish education. Of course, the argument for cancelling the project was more likely due to economics and not the putative one of curriculum overload; for, if the latter were true why is there even more (not less) curriculum overload today than when the project was ended? The argument is spurious.

Less negatively, the Teaching Council could include some non-Irish educationalist who would be expected to bring a particular focus on this issue to the Council's overall remit.

## 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?*

Give good example. This is first and foremost.

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

Employers could celebrate the cultures of either employees, associates, or business partners who have ‘foreign-nationals’, introducing various terms and greetings. Later, offering an opportunity with paid leave or supported fees for a select number of employees who would undertake language acquisition or upskilling on the basis that they would commit to growing the company/business by using those skills. Specific modules of the Junior Achievement programme could be delivered which would engage the attention of primary school children on the culture and language of other countries. Surely, there is enormous scope for *fás, forbairt agus foghlaim* in this successful model. Employees in various workplaces have contributed greatly to bridging the gap between the world of business and that of schoolchildren; with some little creativity even more can be done that includes languages.

## **8. Other Comments**

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

When a project such as the Modern Languages one in primary schools can be cancelled by an education department without any assessment of its role, functioning or success (or not – though this, in my opinion and experience, was not the case, probably because all those involved were enthusiastic about it and committed to it), then one must be worried about the depletion of capacity-building in the Irish educational system; Irish students (and I include myself) compare badly with their ‘foreign’ counterparts in terms of language acquisition. We must, if we are serious about drawing out and celebrating her or his desire and need to learn, imbue the child with a love of languages at that stage in life when motivation is almost a non-issue because it is bred in the bone. At the same time, we should not, as older learners, try to scale the ever-increasing fence of scholastic subjects to be acquired in our secondary system with one – shouldn’t there be more than one, I wonder – more load for which motivation cannot be so readily presumed. Language is thinking, we learn; languages ensure deeper thinking. Let us begin in time, which is to say, early.