

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.

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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?

If the importance of MFL learning is to be taken seriously and effectively, it must be presented ‘bullishly’ and across the sectors simultaneously. Up to now, sporadic attempts have been made to encourage the learning of one MFL. These attempts have often been ‘watered down’ into a non-directional plurilingual context, the result of which may be a laudable raising of cultural awareness but little in the way of competence. The obvious and immediate drawback is funding; however, if the task is deemed of sufficient national importance, funding can be found. A focussed and very specific plan laying out the actions to be taken would be formulated prior to any promotion. The plan would entail:

- The re-introduction of the MLPSI, at least in specific primary schools, having first addressed the issue of curriculum overload. Inevitably, as with all priorities, another subject will have to suffer. Providing 90 minutes MFL teaching per week in selected primary schools is not excessively expensive;
- Second level schools must be convinced that letting go of French as the MFL of choice is not optional. The PPLI was a start but its range and efficacy needs to be studied. It is worth noting in this regard the amazing progress made by the Confucius Institute in encouraging the teaching of Mandarin Chinese. Other cultural institutes such as Goethe, Cervantes and Camões might well be open to similar programmes. A step in this direction has already been taken at primary level by the Russian Embassy with their recent opening of a library in Galway. The cost factor involved in the initial changeover would then be offset;
- FET MFL modules could attract additional credits and a non-optional ‘stagiaire’ programme in trades’ modules could be introduced. Such modules have long been included in other Western European countries, and, in the past, were operated individually and unmonitored in Ireland by various FÁS centres. A bi-lateral agreement between SOLAS and its European equivalents would envisage a cost-effective reciprocal arrangement;
- While very many MFL programmes and modules have been introduced as part of Third Level degree courses, it is arguable that actual MFL degrees have suffered as a result, at least at the level of perceived value. The presence of Ph. D post-graduates employed at relatively low qualification level call centre jobs is indicative of the lack of people MFL fluent and the perceived value of the particular MFL Ph.D. Conversely, those with FETAC 8 qualifications in other disciplines such as Engineering, IT etc and having a ‘smattering’ of an MFL from a short module as part of their degree course is of little practical use and drives business to seek graduates from non-English-speaking countries; c.f. the origin of those taking research graduate places. It is not enough to offer Engineering with Languages and Marketing if the Languages module is very part-time and eventual competency falls low on the CEFR. This module must be as demanding as the main degree course and not an ‘add-on’;
- Since business needs MFL proficiency, organisations such as IBEC must be on board any promotion to be undertaken, perhaps in the form of scholarships,

- internships, sponsorship etc. In the past, IBEC has been supportive of language initiatives;
- Equally, the promotional campaigns of FÁILTE Ireland within Ireland, should contain a simple MFL message. The ‘Gathering’ promotion could have contained a slogan such as ‘Bienvenidos a Irlanda’, raising Irish people’s awareness of the importance of communication and the now European nature of our country;
 - It is not enough to produce a video and a leaflet as was done with the PPLI, it is essential, if serious MFL promotion is envisaged, to use all media in a targeted campaign. Consultation with Conramh na Gaelige on their successful ‘Seachtain na Gaelige’ campaigns might be useful.

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 will always want to communicate in any peer setting. The issue is more in convincing their parents/guardians to gain competency. It is often the case that the child will interpret for the parent and ghettoisation is the feature of the adult rather than the child. The availability of mother tongue evaluation at State examinations largely addresses the question of the child’s language competency. An emerging issue with the migrant population without status is the ban on entrance to Third Level education. This needs to be addressed.

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.

Please see 1. above

Transition Year is an obvious slot for the promotion of foreign language immersion settings. Exchange programmes are especially valuable here, as are programmes working with refugees and bodies such as Féile, providing free English-language conversation classes to migrants.

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?

With the MLPSI, language courses were devised for beginner and ‘dormant’ teachers in conjunction with the then ITs. This ‘stock’ of pedagogic material is still there and could be easily utilised. Teachers self-funding these courses were to be rewarded with EV days. LINGUA-funded courses at European universities were in place and many primary teachers took part in them. ‘Dormant’ teachers could also be offered courses in conjunction with the cultural institutes as a method of on-going exposure to the target language.

Peripatetic native teachers formed a large, and successful, part of the MLPSI. The idea that Second Level schools use the services of a peripatetic native teacher is not unacceptable in cases where displacement is not a factor.

Teacher Training colleges might look at the UK and European models where MFLs feature largely. In this regard, it is worth noting teacher training in Galicia, Spain, where cross-curricular MFL teaching is the order of the day and several subjects are taught through English. Ireland needs to progress towards this goal. It is unavoidable that teachers choosing to teach their subject partly through a foreign language be financially rewarded for doing so. Probably, to achieve the desired level of competence in training, colleges will employ the services of native practionioner.

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?

Pls see 1 above.

Higher Education already has the skills’ set to do this; however, direction is required from Government in the same way as business is urging Third Level institutions to provide graduates with very specific skills. The fact that major competition for students exists between the universities may play a role in future courses offered. From a simple pedagogic viewpoint, the MFL Portfolio, correctly used, is a useful tool.

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?

Considerable work in the area of assessment has already been done by people such as Áine Hyland and bodies such as NCCA. What remains to be done is the implementation of findings. Thought might be given to:

- An MFL inspectorate with proven fluency in the MFL s/he is supporting and evaluating. It is totally unacceptable to assign someone who does not have the MFL at least as a major subject at degree level. Having it as a minor subject is, quite frankly, shocking, and is immediately picked up upon by influential bodies in the field. Perhaps it should no longer be the essential requirement of MFL inspectorate posts that candidates come from a Second Level background? Perhaps it might be more efficacious to focus on linguistic and general educational background regardless of sector?
- The linguistic accuracy of State Examination papers. It is unacceptable that lexical errors, grammatical errors and errors of nuance interpretation appear in State Examination papers. MFL papers should be assiduously proof-read by, perhaps, the education officers at the respective embassies. Mother tongue speakers can correctly answer a particular question and be penalised if the person setting the paper is not aware of the linguistic nuances involved. This question reverts to the linguistic competence of the person setting the paper.

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?

Pls see 1 above.

-If we are serious, we must look at the question of our attitudes towards non-nationals and face the fact that we are slightly xenophobic as a people. Much as we pride ourselves on our 'Hundred Thousand Welcomes', we are not a welcoming people, especially if the non-native is not English-speaking. This requires an attitude change and probably a national media campaign such as that undertaken by the non-smoking lobby. We see more and more cases of racial violence which should make us realise that respect for other cultures is essential and missing in our society. Part of this process is to encourage people away from the mindset which sees no other world outside the Anglophone.

-The national broadcaster could be a major influence in this regard. Something as simple as showing one prime time foreign language film/series per week could be effective. Swedish serials are now highly popular;

-The more exchange arrangements between Irish schools and foreign schools the better and these exchanges are usually very popular among students and parents. Perhaps a tax incentive for parents to send their children on such exchanges could be considered?

-‘Partnering’ via the Web is now quite usual and could be further developed.

-Many websites such as ‘Verbaling’ exist where MFL learners speak to each other via SKYPE. The obvious and very frustrating problem here is the primitive state of broadband provision outside of major urban areas.

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

Pls see 1 above.

8. Other Comments

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

Implementation, implementation, implementation.

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 , or post it to: Tim O’Keeffe, Department of Education and Skills, Marlborough Street, Dublin 1