

REVITALISING MODERN LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN IRELAND:

from Pre-school to Higher Education



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Foreword

A radical overhaul of modern language education is required to give our State a more competitive foothold in global and European markets in a post-Brexit landscape. Our ability to trade internationally, to attract FDI investment and in particular to take full advantage of the employment opportunities that the presence of multinationals has bestowed, is being damaged by the absence of an integrated national approach to international language education.



Ireland needs a robust policy on international languages – one that is detailed, realistic, and achievable. Unfortunately, this Government and the previous failed to provide any comprehensive vision that would transform modern language education in this country. Fine Gael has been in government since 2011, but has yet to seriously address the glaring deficiencies in international language teaching and learning in Ireland.

A key guiding principle in our language strategy should be to cultivate lifelong language learning, which ultimately fosters greater engagement with other cultures at home and abroad.

In consulting upon this strategy, one of the central challenges identified in the delivery of language education in Ireland is the recruitment and retention of qualified language teachers across the sector. Modern language skills here cannot be sustained without adequate numbers of proficient and enthusiastic teachers to help devise and deliver language programmes. Furthermore, the addition of new languages on the curriculum will necessitate a teaching infrastructure that will include many, appropriately-qualified, 'traveling' teachers working across different schools.

In this document we set forward a 10-year strategy for developing modern language education – from early education through primary, post primary and higher education and beyond– which seeks to strategically address the deficit in our education and economic development strategy surrounding modern language skills.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thomas Byrne". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Executive Summary:

Fianna Fáil Strategy for Revitalising Language Education:

- **Early Education:** Develop opportunities for bilingual immersion in English/French or English/Italian for three to five-year-olds participating in the ECCE scheme in preschool
- **Primary Schools:** Re-establish the Modern Languages in Primary School Initiative (MLPSI)
- **Mandatory Modern Language:** Make the learning of an international language to Leaving Certificate level compulsory
- **New Core Languages:** Add Russian and Portuguese to the Junior Cycle language programme & consider Hindi, Arabic and Mandarin as short courses on the Junior Cycle
- **European Languages and Culture Course:** Examine the possibility of designing a new course on the Junior Cycle that centres on European languages and culture in light of Brexit
- **Mandarin:** Roll out Mandarin as a full Leaving Certificate curricular exam subject and award additional points to learners taking it at Higher Level
- **Embrace Common Spoken Languages:** Ensure Polish, Lithuanian, Portuguese and Romanian have curricular specifications at Leaving Certificate level & review of how to make better use of the diverse range of language that immigrants have brought to Ireland
- **Spoken Language:** make speaking and listening comprehension components of Leaving Certificate language examinations to an overall total of 50 per cent
- **Higher Education:** target at least 30 per cent of the higher education cohort to study a foreign language on their programmes through Top Up payments to HEIs and elective modules
- **Teacher Training:** Subsidise additional in-services courses overseas for secondary teachers to aid pedagogical and linguistic CPD

Introduction – Overcoming the Challenges to Foreign Language Education in Ireland

The teaching of foreign languages at primary level in Ireland was ended in 2012, with the official abolition of the Modern Languages in Primary School Initiative by the Minister for Education in 2012. Since then, Ireland has fallen further out of sync with the rest of the EU with regards foreign language education and competency. We are one of only four countries in the OECD which does not have a compulsory curriculum for modern languages for 9-11 year olds. Moreover we have the lowest number of children learning a foreign language at 10 years. This ignoble record on foreign languages in Ireland is at a time when the rest of the EU is going the other way, with almost 60% of all lower secondary students in the EU now learning two foreign languages or more, up from 46% in 2005¹. Indeed, unlike in 2003, learning a second foreign language is now compulsory for all students from the later years of primary education in Denmark, Greece and Iceland and from the beginning of lower secondary education in the Czech Republic, France, Italy, Malta and Poland. In all these education systems, except Belgium (French Community), the opportunity to learn two languages is granted to all students by the beginning of lower secondary education at the latest. Ireland is alone among EU countries in not requiring lower secondary school pupils to learn one foreign language.

Although the overarching reason for the abolition of the MLPSI in 2012 were budgetary, the decision was justified by Minister Quinn on the basis of a review of the program by the NCCA which identified a number of challenges with the introduction of a third (foreign) language at primary level in addition to English and Irish. In reality, the NCCA Review² did not recommend the abolition of the MLPSI but did recommend that *“that modern languages do not become part of the Primary School Curriculum at present as an additional and separate subject”*³. The central rationale behind this recommendation were to do with curriculum and school day-time constraints, teacher supply issues and the lack of progression between primary and post-primary level foreign language curricula.

Since this report, other arguments have been put forward by the Government and the DES against Learning Foreign Language (a third language) at primary level in Ireland. These include:

1. Motivation: the argument is often heard from Government that Ireland is a primarily English speaking country and, like all other English speaking countries, is poor at foreign languages as learners lack the same motivation to become fluent in a foreign language as non-English speakers due to the role of English as the common international tongue (most widely learnt and spoken foreign language

¹ European Commission 2017. Key Data on Teaching Languages at Schools 2017.

² NCCA 2008. Modern Languages in the Primary School Curriculum – Feasibility and Futures.

³ Ibid, p.9.

among non-native English speakers). While there is an element of truth to this argument, the lack of motivation for learning foreign language is hardly an insurmountable hurdle to improving language education. Other English language speaking countries, such as New Zealand, Canada and Wales experience the same difficulties of low competency in foreign language education but their Governments all show a desire to change course and improve foreign language learning overall, beginning with their primary school-age population.⁴

2. Role of Irish: the Government and DES often argue that Irish students are already learning two languages at primary level, like their EU counterparts, and it is more effective to focus on teaching Irish as a second language (in most cases) than learning a third, foreign language. However Ireland is not alone, even amongst English speaking countries, in having two state languages. Belgium, Wales and Canada all have two state languages and have higher rates of foreign language learning among 9 to 11 years olds than Ireland.

3. Curriculum Overload: related to point 2, the NCCA also argues that there is no spare curricular time to teach another subject during the primary school day and in addition children are already experiencing ‘curriculum overload’ at primary level. However a significant proportion of schools (24%) offered after-school foreign language learning before the MPSLI and many still do. Given the importance of language skills for the next generation, we believe time can be found in the curriculum to teach pupils age 9 to 12 a modern language.

While all these arguments point to the many challenges to improving foreign language education in Ireland – and in particular the challenge of improving foreign language education at primary level – none of them pose insurmountable obstacles. We believe that with an ambitious vision and some thinking outside the box a new strategy on foreign language education - which includes beginning language education from an earlier age – can lead to meaningful improvement in the language skills of our population and our workforce over the next ten years.

In the following sections we outline a framework for this new language strategy from early years to higher level and beyond.

⁴ For example: for Wales see ESTYN, 2016 ‘Modern Foreign Languages in Wales’, for Canada see Mady, C., Turnbull, M. (2012) Official Language Bilingualism for Allophones in Canada: Exploring Future Research, TESL Canada Journal/Revue TESL du Canada, 29(2).

Getting a Head Start: Early Years Language Education and Immersion

Many children of preschool age have a primary language and very basic L2 abilities. The acquisition of an international language would be very beneficial for children who are about to enter primary school, and this would build their confidence in their continuous language education. This is the ideal time for generic language learning by children.

Therefore, consideration should be given to bilingual immersion in English and French/Italian/Spanish for three to five-year-olds participating in the ECCE scheme in preschool. These three European languages are perceived to be among the easier world languages to learn. Most young children will have developed the requisite verbal and listening skills to use language to express themselves and respond to literacy experiences through story, art, song and games.

L2 immersion at this stage would further expand their understanding of language meaning, and new cultures.

At present, a tiny number of preschools in Ireland operate programmes in French or Spanish, and English⁵. European languages are not taught here, but rather children are instructed in Spanish/French and in English simultaneously. To facilitate the potential roll-out of similar schemes going forward Fianna Fáil is proposing a French/Italian/Spanish elective be placed on the QQI level six syllabus in Early Childhood Care & Education. This would allow ECCE room leaders to provide rudimentary international language skills when interacting with young children, as part of the *Communicating* theme on the Aistear curriculum framework. With suitably-qualified staff available, early learning centres could then choose whether to introduce a modern language in their services.

Ireland is a multicultural country which now includes some 810,400 residents born outside the State – more than 17 per cent of the population⁶. Language programmes in early years education will boost cognitive development, and cultural awareness in school, at home and in public settings. Although there may not be an opportunity to develop multilingual proficiencies in the formative years of primary school, initial language immersion would give children vital exposure to the richness of expression found in other languages.

This would give them a head start in the comprehension and communication of other languages when they attend primary school. It would also nurture their appreciation of modern languages instead of relying on English as a lingua franca.

⁵ E.g. Montessori en Français in Lucan, Co. Dublin; Spanish and Italian Montessori programmes in, Monkstown, Co.. Dublin

⁶ Census 2016 results (April 2017) Chapter 5 'Diversity'.

Developing Early Confidence and Competency: Primary School Language Education

Primary and second-level students write, listen, speak and read in Irish and English on a daily basis within the education system. Therefore, the expansion of L3 learning across all education levels has a strong base to build upon. Other European countries offer bilingual language instruction in their primary schools. For example in the Netherlands, a five-year pilot programme - that began in 2014 and is in operation in 18 schools – has English as the instruction language for up to 50 per cent of the school day. The Bilingual Primary Education project involves children aged between four and six-years-old, and in this model of language immersion the emphasis is on understanding and communication in English.

The key strategic objective of the primary school strand of Fianna Fáil's language strategy is the construction of a solid platform for transferable language skills and competencies into second and third-level education. To this end Fianna Fáil will introduce international language tuition again in fifth and sixth class, as was the case with the Modern Languages in Primary School Initiative (MLPSI). For a marginal saving, the Fine Gael/Labour government decided to abolish the MLPSI in June 2012 in a senselessly regressive step. It had been established by Fianna Fáil in hundreds of primary schools since 1998.

We believe that one of the reasons for the shortage of foreign language skills among the population is the absence of structured language education at primary level. This has to change, and we will develop a clear framework for integrated language education in Ireland, starting with the re-establishment of the MLPSI programme in selected primary schools nationwide. Following a review, it is envisaged the programme would be expanded on a national basis. This will be a huge help to parents who are privately financing language tuition outside of school hours.

Deepening and Expanding Language Competency at Post-Primary

Minister Richard Bruton's proposed language strategy, which has not yet been published with fully costed figures, contains vague and aspirational goals for language education at post-primary level. Building on the reintroduction of the MLPSI, Fianna Fáil would diversify the range of languages offered at second-level. These new additions would form part of a coherent plan that would synchronise teaching, learning, assessment and progression from Junior Cycle to Senior Cycle.

Fianna Fáil would make the learning of an international language to Leaving Certificate level compulsory, and not just simply raise the number of students taking a language by 10 per cent, as suggested by Fine Gael. At present, it is anomalous that Ireland is the only country in Europe (apart from Scotland) where foreign language study is optional. In fact, in most EU countries children begin studying a first foreign language as a compulsory subject between six and seven years of age.

Effective language learning involving grammar, syntax, pronunciation and comprehension of foreign languages at Junior Cycle is key to successful progression to Senior Cycle. Fianna Fáil would add Russian and Portuguese

to French, Italian, Spanish and German on the Junior Cycle modern foreign languages curriculum. Russia, Portugal and Brazil are significant commercial markets, and Russian and Portuguese are already available as exam subjects on the Leaving Certificate. And given the size and importance of economies in India, western Asia/north Africa, and China, consideration should be given toward the development of short courses on the Junior Cycle in Hindi, Arabic and Mandarin. Also, in light of Brexit, a new and separate generic course could potentially be considered for the Junior Cycle that centres on European languages and culture.

In Transition Year Chinese language and culture is offered as a subject in some schools, as well as Japanese. Mandarin should be introduced as a full Leaving Certificate curricular exam subject. Recent Census 2016 results outline that more than 17,500 Irish residents are speaking Chinese at home. This is a substantial number of native speakers, and provides a significant potential pool of future teachers. The national roll-out of Mandarin could also be facilitated by the creation of designated centres for Mandarin teaching in all counties or Education and Training Board areas. In addition, the UCD Confucius Institute for Ireland run a Diploma and MA in Teaching Chinese programmes, and UCC also offers comparable MA programmes. However, initially, as Mandarin is being developed on the curriculum from a student/teacher supply perspective, the first cohort of prospective learners in secondary schools may have to be awarded additional points to make Mandarin more attractive.

The Government's brief published notes on its proposed language strategy suggests that Polish, Lithuanian and Portuguese should have curricular specifications at Leaving Certificate level in place of their non-curricular exam status.

Fianna Fáil would argue that Romanian also needs to be added to this list in view of Census 2016 results that show Romanian was the third most common foreign language spoken in Irish homes after Polish and French. The results indicated that more than 36,500 Irish residents spoke Romanian at home. In 2016, Romanian was the third most commonly-sat Leaving Certificate subject taken for non-curricular EU language after Polish and Lithuanian. Separate, further study should also be commissioned to see how Ireland can best use the huge range of languages that immigrants have brought to this country, and to ensure effective language maintenance within the education system to preserve their linguistic capital.

Recent figures show that French and German were the two most popular European languages on the curriculum on the Leaving Certificate in 2016, and continued acquisition of skills in these languages bode well for the future when Britain formally leaves the European Union. Consultation should be undertaken to examine the possibility of increasing the number of marks for the speaking and listening comprehension components of Leaving Certificate language examinations to an overall total of 50 per cent, instead of the current 45 per cent. Oral proficiencies, in particular, provide Irish and international employers with a key competitive advantage, and are in high demand. All current modern language syllabi in second-level could also be reviewed and altered to include a commercially-focused element. This would comprise transaction and interaction vocabulary for business communication, specifically geared towards employment in companies across Europe.

Growing and Refining Language Skills for Life in Higher Education

Fianna Fáil supports, in principle, Fine Gael's proposal to increase numbers participating in the Erasmus scheme. Immersion in the language is the only way to learn it effectively because it forces the learner to survive and use the language in a community of native speakers. It is vital that third level students take a modern language prior to the commencement of employment because there will be fewer opportunities for these students to study thereafter.

While it may not be possible to add a language component to every level six, seven, and eight programme, Fianna Fáil would progress an initiative whereby at least 30 per cent of the higher education cohort would study a foreign language on their programmes, instead of Fine Gael's 20 per cent target.

Other proposals to improve international language education in third-level could include:

- The integration of a language module on newly-validated Humanities, Engineering, Business, Law, Science, Tourism, and ICT-related programmes in universities, Institutes of Technology, and private colleges from 2021. These languages can be taken as an elective subject and would be worth a minimum of five credits.
- The Department of Education and Skills and further/higher education institutions fostering greater partnerships with employers, and embassies, in Ireland to give employers a greater input in judging whether learning outcomes are being met in language exams/continuous assessment.
- Provide 'top up' payments to higher education providers to incentivise Arts and other BA students to major in a modern language to improve the standard of language education provision in second-level schools.
- Increase the number of short online language courses offered to adult learners, currently outside the education system, to cater for the demand for such services and prompt wider interest in international languages.
- Create a specific strategy for further education programmes regarding international language provision.

Expanding Linguistic Training Opportunities for Teachers

The availability of authoritative and competent language teaching staff is absolutely critical to the success of an international language framework in Irish education. Teachers are the backbone of any overarching conceptual plan to equip learners with the requisite language skills. If an adequate supply of teachers is not available to maintain the language framework, then the latter is doomed to fail. Fine Gael has not factored the paucity of foreign languages instructors into account when drafting its language education vision. Fianna Fáil will insist on comprehensive teacher training across all education sectors to ensure supply meets the demand.

We propose that a language elective be placed on the QQI level six programme in Early Childhood Care and Education so that childcare workers are provided with a basic communicative proficiency in a modern language

an early years settings. BA degrees in Early Childhood education could also incorporate a language component. The introduction of a modern language education at primary level may necessitate the addition of an international language module on Bachelor of Education programmes.

To cater for the shortfall in modern language teachers at second-level, and the demand for modern languages in the public sector, Fianna Fáil proposes the creation of a new centralised language academy for all public and civil servants, modelled along the lines of the Civil Service Language Centre. This will facilitate existing teachers who need to improve their skills in a foreign language on a CPD basis, provide new courses in modern languages for teachers seeking to teach one, and also offer beginner, intermediate and advanced modern language training to civil servants working in all Government departments and associated agencies. At present, individual Government bodies are paying private providers for such a service at significant expense to the taxpayer.

In addition, countrywide language forums should be encouraged, where second and third-level instructors meet informally to talk, and exchange teaching and learning ideas. This would further motivate language staff to reach levels of excellence, and help inspire students in the classroom. The Department of Education and Skills would have a role in facilitating and organising such monthly meetings. In addition, more secondary teachers should be able to avail of subsidised in-services courses overseas, over the summer months, to aid pedagogical and linguistic CPD.

Fianna Fáil would also examine the possibility of adding either a French, Italian, Spanish, German or Chinese news bulletin to the RTÉ News Now channel at night. This would create a learning opportunity for students and teachers, and also help boost Ireland's tourist offering. Additionally, a feasibility study could be carried out to see if some such domestic programming could be provided by language institutes and providers in Ireland. As is the case presently teachers themselves can privately enhance their own linguistic skills by taking free Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs. A variety of other language aids, apps, online portals and sites can also be utilised, and many useful ideas are already published via the Post-Primary Languages Initiative website.

As the national public service broadcaster RTÉ would also be asked to give a commitment in its own Statement of Strategy to increase the number of foreign language films and formats it transmits. This would promote greater cultural awareness and constitute a learning tool for students. RTÉ should also be encouraged to broadcast more programmes for young people that involve age-appropriate bilingualism.



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