



LANGUAGES CONNECT

A CONSULTATION REPORT ON IRELAND'S
STRATEGY FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN
EDUCATION 2017-2026

Introduction

To inform the development of the *Foreign Languages in Education Strategy* a consultation process took place which consisted of four phases:

1. Consideration of Existing Documents
2. Call for Submissions (August – October 2014)
3. Two forums seeking the views of key stakeholders. The first forum focused on the primary and post-primary sectors (February 2015), and the second on Higher Education and Employers (June 2015).
4. Deep Dive with the Minister for Education and Skills (December 2016)

Summary

The key opinions presented across the four phases of the consultation process are summarised below.

Strategy

- The need for a strategy covering all languages, not just ‘foreign’ languages

Teacher Education

- The critical importance of teacher education, both initial and continuing (at all levels), and of language proficiency at point of entry to initial teacher education programmes to provide guidance on appropriate teaching methodologies
- The requirement to have minimum language criteria at entry and points at third level education
- Encourage more language graduates with the full range of language skills to become language teachers, particularly for the post-primary sector

CEFR and CLIL

- The desirability of benchmarking all examinations with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)
- Use the European Language Portfolio (ELP) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in language learning

Schools and Communities

- The desirability of an early start (primary or early childhood) in learning languages and related intercultural understanding
- The need to reform foreign languages curricula and examinations at post-primary level, including a review of provision and assessment relating to non-curricular languages
- Increase the number of Foreign Language Assistants (FLAs) and the languages used coming to Ireland, and target more Irish graduates to choose a FLA experience in other countries

- The importance of the home/heritage languages of migrants and their value as a national resource, and the need to support and enhance the proficiency of our migrants in their home/heritage languages

Higher Education and Enterprise

- The importance of immersion opportunities for third level students to enhance their proficiency in the language and culture
- The need to diversify the range of languages on offer to meet the real and emerging needs in business and society
- The need to raise awareness in society at large of the benefits of varied language capacity for intercultural understanding and positive citizenship
- The role of employers and higher/further education in promoting the importance of learning foreign languages
- The need to raise awareness of the competitive advantage in terms of job and career opportunities to be had from language competence and cultural awareness

Phase 1: Consideration of Existing Documents

The development of the Strategy was mindful of existing documents published in relation to the teaching and learning of foreign languages in Ireland. The key documents include:

- *Languages in the Post-Primary Curriculum* by David Little. NCCA 2003.
- *Language Education Policy Profile*. Department of Education and Skills and Council of Europe, 2008.
- *National Languages Strategy*. Royal Irish Academy 2011.
- *Key skills in Enterprise to Trade Internationally*. Forfás and Expert Group for Future Skills Needs, 2012.
- *Draft Council of Europe conclusions on multilingualism and the development of language competences*. Council of Europe, May 2014.
- *The ET2020 working group on Transversal Skills is considering Languages, Enterprise and Digital Skills and a report is due by the end of the year*.

The *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030*, which was published in 2010, was also considered in the context of Irish language learning. Curricular developments by the NCCA relating to both the development of the *Primary Language Curriculum* and the new Junior Cycle specifications in English, Irish and Modern Foreign Languages specification were also considered.

A more detailed account of opinions gathered in Phases 2-4 are presented below.

Phase 2: Call for Submissions (August – October 2014)

To inform the development of the strategy, an open consultation document (see Appendix 1) was released in August 2014 and submissions were sought and accepted until October 2014. The

consultation document was divided into two sections: the first section sets out the national context and background of foreign languages in Irish society at the time. The second asked a series of consultation questions intended to promote reflection and stimulate thought and discussion. This included questions from retention of heritage languages among migrant children to the role of employers in enhancing linguistic capacities.

Over 70 written responses were received from a variety of sources (see Appendix 1). These ranged from cultural institutes to primary and post-primary teachers. The breakdown of responses which replied directly to the questions outlined in the consultation document were as follows:

- Primary: 6
- Post-Primary: 25
- Third Level: 16
- Cultural Institutes: 3
- Enterprise: 3
- Other Organisations and Individuals: 18

In addition to these, six correspondences were received which did not directly address the questions raised in the consultation document, but addressed language provision in the country and followed similar themes and topics.

Themes within the Submissions

From the submissions received, five main themes were identified:

1. The Strategy should be a Languages Strategy – not a Foreign Languages Strategy
2. Heritage Languages
3. Teacher Education
4. Benchmarking all languages across all levels of education with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)
5. Role for Employers and Higher Education

A summary for each theme is presented below.

Theme 1. The Strategy should be a Languages Strategy – not a Foreign Languages Strategy

- a. A National Languages Strategy should include English and Irish in addition to other languages. Keeping English and Irish separate assumes that either one of these is the L1 for the population which can no longer be assumed to be the case. In addition to this, any strategy needs to consider that language acquisition is a life-long learning process.
- b. Community languages, spoken here in Ireland, should be given recognition in a languages strategy, rather than a foreign languages strategy. This should be done as they are not considered foreign by their speakers. Community languages should be considered in the context of the development of the Primary Language Curriculum.

- c. Languages should be provided in a way that reflects the needs of each community rather than blanket provision of a number of languages for all.
- d. The use of the term “foreign” was not favoured among responders. Languages are not considered foreign to their native speakers and can create an ‘us’ and ‘them’ divide.
- e. It is important to use the opportunity when developing a strategy to explore interesting and relevant links across languages so that investment in the learning of one language (including the first language) can support and inform the learning of another.

Theme 2. Heritage Languages

- a. The importance of maintaining the language proficiency of migrants and heritage speakers was emphasised. A number of suggestions were made to promote this:
 - i. Broaden the integrated languages curriculum at primary to include awareness of other languages and especially the languages present in a school community.
 - ii. Actively encourage heritage language speakers to enter the teaching profession, and investigate the possibility of bringing language assistants from those countries to Irish schools to support heritage language maintenance.
 - iii. Provide guidance and training for teachers on teaching bilingual children, methodologies for encouraging L1 maintenance, implementing differentiation and co-operative learning, using Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) techniques.
 - iv. Increase and extend English as an Additional Language (EAL) support for migrant children who require it.
 - v. Raise awareness that having a language other than English or Irish is not a hindrance but a valuable asset.
 - vi. Support and inform migrant parents in their L1 via networks and statutory bodies dealing with migrant issues.
 - vii. Support and fund schools that wish to offer L1 support for heritage languages and give guidelines to schools on establishing criteria for teaching heritage languages.
 - viii. Introduce additional languages through Junior Cycle Short Courses.
 - ix. Promote non-curricular Leaving Certificate languages and provide resources and online support for heritage language speakers.
 - x. Introduce an oral competency exam for Leaving Certificate examinations for heritage languages.
 - xi. Develop language curricula that can be delivered online from Infant classes to Senior Cycle.
 - xii. Allow use of school buildings for after-school and weekend heritage language classes.
 - xiii. Provide multilingual summer camps.
- b. Use the term ‘community’ or ‘heritage’ or ‘home’ languages rather than ‘migrant’ languages.
- c. Introduce multilingual primary schools.
- d. Provide official recognition for the complementary education sector.

Theme 3. Teacher Education

- a. A need for a change in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses on foreign language teaching.
 - i. Provide more teaching methodology on Professional Master of Education (PME) programmes.
 - ii. Monitor PME programmes regularly (Teaching Council).
 - iii. Enable qualified and practising teachers to contribute to PME programmes.
- b. Introduce minimum criteria for language proficiency entry levels to ITE programmes.
- c. Provide CPD in both language teaching methodology and language proficiency. Incentives should be provided for teachers to upskill in target languages.
- d. Recognition of non-degree expertise: Registration criteria for the Teaching Council should be widened to allow individuals with significant language expertise to gain accreditation as teachers. This is particularly relevant in the context of utilising people with expertise in new languages needed by the Irish economy e.g. Chinese, Polish, Japanese and Russian.
- e. Make a module in a modern language compulsory as part of the B. Ed. programme in all primary school teacher training colleges.

Theme 4. Benchmarking all languages across all levels of education with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

- a. Benchmark all exams with the CEFR and use the accompanying European Language Portfolio (ELP).
- b. All curricula and certification should be based on the principles of the CEFR.
- c. Beyond benchmarking base all curricula and certification on the core principles of the CEFR. The CEFR principles complement the new *Framework for Junior Cycle*.
- d. Establish an agency to promote and monitor the process of introduction and implementation of new curricula.

Theme 5. Role for Employers and Higher Education

- a. Raise awareness among students at an early stage of the types of careers available that require good language skills.
- b. Raise awareness among employers of the value of language skills.
- c. Encourage the development of partnerships between enterprise, third level language schools in HEIs, and other stakeholders.
- d. Establish a Languages Advisory Board which would adopt an integrated approach in relation to education and business interests.
- e. Reform language teaching at third level: teach languages for specified purposes and adopt a key role in the provision of appropriate pedagogy.
- f. Adopt modern language criteria for matriculation requirements for all third level institutes and add bonus points for higher level grades at Leaving Certificate.

Further points were raised which are relevant across the above themes:

- The need for a large campaign to promote the importance of learning foreign languages (akin to Seachtain na Gaeilge).
 - The campaign should promote that languages and cultural awareness are valuable at varying levels of proficiency.
- In the context of raising awareness, there is a need to address the negative legacy of Irish and look to promote the language in positive contexts.
- Introduce compulsory oral examinations in Junior Cycle and increase percentage for oral for Leaving Certificate examinations.
- Increase the number of Foreign Language Assistants.
- Encourage heightened participation in European programmes e.g. Erasmus+ and eTwinning.
- Develop a co-ordinated strategy for the teaching of Asian languages. As part of this, centres of excellence should be created and incentives for schools to introduce these languages should be encouraged.
- Though there is a strong call for diversification of languages taught, there are also many competing voices for different languages:
 - The “traditional” curricular languages (French, German, Spanish, Italian)
 - The “new” curricular languages (Japanese, Russian, Arabic)
 - The non-curricular languages (especially Polish)
 - Mandarin Chinese

Phase 3: Views of Key Stakeholders – Two Forums

Part 1: Forum held February, 2015

Following the analysis of written submissions from Phase 1, a decision was made to hold two forums in 2015. The first was held on 27 February 2015. The forum focused on the primary and post-primary education sectors. To stimulate the discussion, two presentations were made (see Appendix 1):

- A Framework for Consultation on a Foreign Languages in Education Strategy in Ireland: Karen Ruddock
- Languages: Curriculum and Assessment: Breda Naughton

Following the presentations, six topics prioritised in Phase 2, the written submissions, were discussed:

1. Languages, not Foreign Languages
2. Migrant Languages
3. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)
4. Employers and Higher Education
5. Teacher Education
6. Co-ordination

Topic 1. Languages, Not Foreign Languages

Attendees of the forum proposed that any languages strategy being developed should be presented as a ‘languages strategy’ rather than a ‘foreign languages strategy’.

Topic 2. Migrant Languages

Participants noted that a language strategy should give recognition to the various language communities now living in Ireland. The languages spoken by these communities are heritage languages and not considered foreign languages to them.

As part of a general languages strategy, it was noted that knowledge of English and Irish as L1 or L2 no longer holds true. There are now many other heritage/home languages being spoken. However, a distinction between both English and Irish and foreign languages would need to be made within the Strategy.

Parents should be encouraged to teach their children their own language alongside English and Irish. Part of this encouragement should include a broadening of the Primary Language Curriculum to include heritage languages to encourage general language learning strategies rather than language specific learning.

Topic 3. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

The presence of children who do not have English or Irish as L1 or L2 should be viewed as a positive and they should be encouraged to enhance their own language skills. The CEFR should be used to record and track progress throughout the education system

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) should be used to complement the CEFR. The ELP is made up of three components¹:

- i. A language passport – designed to be a cumulative record of the owner’s language learning and intercultural experiences.
- ii. A language biography – a reflective learning document of the owner’s language learning.
- iii. A dossier – a non-defined document which often takes the form of a table of contents for the owner to populate.

The forum highlighted that the use of the CEFR and ELP could complement the implementation of the *Framework for Junior Cycle* as they focus on key skills, can-do descriptors as learning outcomes, components in self-assessment and formative assessment, and learner autonomy.

Topic 4. Employers and Higher Education

In promoting and using the CEFR within the education system, employers can better gauge the standard of language skills recruits they require from the different levels within the Irish education system.

¹ NCCA, *Languages in the Post-Primary Curriculum a discussion paper*. 2003. pp 29-30.
<http://www.ncca.ie/uploadedfiles/Publications/Languagesdiscussionpaper.pdf>

It was recommended that there is a need to raise awareness among students at an early stage of their education of the breadth of careers available to those with good language skills in the global market. However, it was noted that Irish employers often lack realisation of the potential international markets open to them should they employ staff with sufficient language expertise, particularly among the SME sector.

In order to promote the uptake of foreign languages, the need for an integrated approach to language skills development was identified, where language skills would be viewed alongside other skills as being equally important. At third level, it was stated that in courses where languages feature as course components or part of a joint honours degree, they should be presented and taught in context rather than in isolation. For business degrees with languages, the language should be taught in a business context and put to practical use as much as possible within the degree programme.

The decline in numbers studying a foreign language at third level was raised, along with the proposal from the Association of University Presidents regarding the possible abolishment of the matriculation requirement to have a foreign language for entry to any NUI.²

The potential of incentivising students to undertake language studies was also raised.

Topic 5. Teacher Education

The potential to evaluate language methodology in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses was raised. It was noted that compartmentalising language learning was viewed as a hindrance to the success of language development. In line with this, the potential to synergise the objectives and goals of different Department strategies (e.g. a Foreign Languages in Education Strategy and the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy) was discussed.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) could also be used as a method to enhance teachers' language capacity. It was recommended that the possibility of providing CPD abroad as an avenue of experience should be expanded. Such opportunity could form part of an Erasmus+ mobility programme and promote teacher fluency in languages.

The CEFR should be used as a measure for language competency of teachers as well as students.

Topic 6. Co-Ordination

The need for a co-ordinating agency was discussed. While the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) acts at a European level to provide information and documentation, the question regarding what Irish agency would act as the body to provide national support for a languages strategy was raised.

² As of August 2017, a third language is still required for entry into Architecture, Arts, Human Sciences, Law, Art and Design, Commerce, Medicine, Dentistry, Health Sciences, Veterinary Medicine, and Social Science degrees.

No third language is required for: Computer Science, Engineering, Science, Agriculture, Food Science and Technology, Engineering and Architecture, and Veterinary Nursing. A third language is not needed for Social Science in UCD or Architecture in UCD.

Part 2: Forum held June, 2015

A second forum was held in June 2015 with stakeholders from higher education, further education and the business sector being invited to share their views following analysis of the written consultation process. The focus of the forum was on the teaching and learning of foreign languages at third level, further education and training and the links between education and business. The following presentations were made (see Appendix 1):

- Language Learning in Ireland at Third Level: Requirements in a Global World: Professor Vera Regan
- The Importance of Language Competence to Support International Trade: Julie Sinnamon
- A Framework for Consultation on a Foreign Languages in Education Strategy for Ireland: Karen Ruddock

The topics addressed included:

1. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)
2. European Language Portfolio (ELP)
3. Immersion Experiences Abroad
4. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)
5. Other Opportunities

1. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

As with the previous forum, the importance around the implementation of the CEFR in this sector was discussed. Attendees stressed that the CEFR is an externally validated framework recognised by professionals, academic institutions and accreditation bodies. Benchmarking language learning against the CEFR would allow Irish bodies to benchmark their proficiency tests against those set by accreditation bodies abroad such as Cambridge for English, DELE for Spanish, and DELF-DALF for French. Through its implementation, language needs can also be mapped out in a range of professions, allowing employers to set clear guidelines for applicants to reflect their needs. In universities, use of the CEFR would allow for a defined framework around which examinations could be set. The CEFRs promotion of 'partial competences', such as oral fluency, was also noted. These partial competences can be used to fill employer needs and define learning outcomes of educational modules, rather than assuming full fluency is required for any job or is the only desired outcome of language learning. Use of the CEFR in this capacity may also allow employers to identify jobs where language competency needs are not at university graduate level, potentially opening job opportunities to new markets.

It was noted that the CEFR is a framework and not an instrument which should be used to inform teaching, learning and assessment. Its use should be adapted to the specific context of the learning environment. Sufficient CPD would be required across all sectors about the CEFR if it is to be successfully implemented.

2. European Language Portfolio (ELP)

As with the previous forum, the use of the European Language Portfolio (ELP) was also raised. While there were some concerns about the self-assessment nature of the ELP, it was noted that the ELP could easily be supplemented with externally validated documentation which could be supplied as part of the 'dossier' section. These externally validated documents could in turn be tied to CEFR levels. It was noted that several ELP models have been developed by HEIs, and these often include additional focus on intercultural learning, however no single model exists for national use.

3. Immersion Experiences Abroad

The use of immersion techniques/time abroad was also discussed in detail. There was a consensus on the essential value of immersion/time spent abroad for language and intercultural learning, including for non-language graduates. The potential of making a period of study abroad compulsory was raised, depending on the course of study. It was noted that UCD reward study abroad through the additional use of the word "International" being included in the degree title for those that undertake a period of international study.

While abroad, students often opt to study through English, even if studying the language of the country they are visiting. Students should be encouraged to study through the language of the country they are visiting (where possible) and this achievement should be recorded. Attendees felt that many students do not undertake this challenge due to the existing culture of learning, which places a greater focus on results achieved than the overall linguistic learning acquired.

4. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

The use of Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in Higher/Further Education was also discussed. Attendees felt that there was a lack of capacity to deliver through CLIL in Higher and Further Education settings. This was connected to an overall lack of resources in the sector. However, it was pointed out that given Irish academics lecture through English abroad, could exchange programmes be used to facilitate foreign academics lecturing through their own language in Ireland.

5. Other Opportunities

It was noted that language learning on non-language courses is available through electives in HEIs. However, courses which traditionally were offered with a language component are increasingly being offered with language as an option, which was seen as a worrying demotion of the status of language learning. A pro-language policy would act as encouragement for students to take-up further studies in foreign languages.

Phase 4: Deep Dive with the Minister for Education and Skills, December 2016

The Minister for Education and Skills, Richard Bruton TD, hosted a roundtable discussion in December 2016 to gain further viewpoints on a foreign languages strategy. Invitees were representative of all levels of education, ranging from early years to higher education and included representatives from the enterprise sector. Appendix 4 provides a list of the invitees. Six key themes were discussed which were reflective of discussion at previous phases of the Strategy's consultation process:

1. Early Learning
2. Primary Education
3. Post-Primary Education
4. Higher Education
5. Broader Issues
6. Enterprise Supports/Awareness Raising

However, particular attention was paid to the following in the discussion:

- The time available and the breadth and balance of curricular experiences
- Incentivising teachers and students to study foreign languages
- Ensuring that principals and leaders in schools value foreign languages
- Heightening awareness of Erasmus+ opportunities
- Emphasising the importance of developing cultural awareness as well as a particular language proficiency

A summary of the topics discussed within each theme is set out below.

Early Learning

- Early language learning is important in developing language skills
- New Primary Language Curriculum, a multi-lingual approach needs to be emphasised – guidance on how to adopt their approach will be required by teachers
- Migrant children – Their heritage languages are a positive language resource for Ireland. They can enthuse Irish students to want to learn other languages
- Some noted that gaining inter-cultural awareness may be more beneficial than language acquisition
- Links need to be created with parents to increase literacy levels
- Pre-planning is needed for curriculum management at pre-school level
- Use of language support allocation is important
- Not enough focus on communicative aspects of language
- Other countries start learning additional languages earlier than in Ireland

Primary and Post-Primary

- Increase language awareness, especially how to learn a language and intercultural competence
- There are problems recruiting Irish graduates to go to other countries as language assistants
- Linguistic strategy in each school should be developed
- School partnerships – pen pals, study projects, exchanges (EU funding available?) should be promoted
- Implement CEFR and CPD to enhance language teaching and learning
- CLIL – maximise exposure to language in meaningful way – language and subject teachers working together. Learning a language in a standalone context leads to failure
- Students from Gaelscoil value languages
- Graduate teachers have languages which they do not teach, this presents a lot of opportunity
- Teacher education – concurrent degrees – primary + foreign language
- Broaden range of languages available to include not only French, German, Spanish and Italian but to also include Polish, Chinese, Russian and Japanese

Post-Primary

- Time available in post primary is limiting what can be achieved
- Current criteria for Teaching Council registration can lead to difficulties e.g. for teaching of non-curricular languages
- Language clubs in schools should be encouraged
- Need to support short courses in foreign languages in Junior Cycle
- Motivation for students to choose foreign languages needs to be prioritised
- Not enough support for immersion for teachers in initial teacher education and elsewhere
- Incentives for teachers and students to take foreign languages need to be available
- Junior Cycle Modern language specification should include CEFR, AFL, formal assessment which can have a backwash effect. CLIL, language immersion, task based learning approaches should be adopted
- Minority languages – space for students to attend classes at weekends should be available
- Potential for TY term in China – exchange model could generate income
- Mandarin Chinese is not currently available as a Leaving Certificate examinable subject – Teaching Council issues for teachers as follow on from short course in Junior Cycle
- Professional accreditation – makes it difficult to fit in languages
- TY programmes – work placement experiences abroad could be explored as a possibility
- Maynooth doing post-primary teaching degree with languages – could this be explored as a model for the future?
- current JC examination does not award candidates for their oral skills - many students only learn if they are rewarded for this effort in the exams
- Principal in a school needs to value foreign languages. If teachers have qualifications in second languages , these should be offered to students, rather than concentrating on one language, which is usually French

- Languages tend to be squeezed out with emphasis on STEM, Coding, etc.
- Students choose a foreign language because of CAO/matriculation requirements, not because they want or enjoy studying a language. They do not see the opportunities which languages can present.
- Spanish government would be willing to help with promotion of languages and with provision of resources. Language assistants come from France and Germany as well as Spain

Higher Education

- Not enough volume of students with levels of written and spoken proficiency required (Voxpro)
- Bursary – not attracting students due to workload (Bord Bia)
- Erasmus increases proficiency – Erasmus take-up dependent on socio-economic group
- Erasmus targets / incentives (grant not enough, need top ups)
- Issue with teaching through English in many of the Erasmus exchange programmes
- Lack of awareness of Erasmus opportunities. It needs greater promotion
- Measure outcomes being achieved through the CEFR
- Contextualise learning using CLIL
- Engagement with enterprise will help promote the importance of language learning
- Broader range of languages (Asian languages) should be on offer
- British Council metrics (systematic approach) should be considered
- Implement CEFR and CPD across Higher Education institutes
- Humanities programmes in Institutes of Technology are being reduced
- Immersion and motivation are issues for students in the context of foreign language learning
- Male students don't opt for foreign languages in third level in significant numbers. Languages need to be paired with other subjects to make languages attractive to male students – although workload then may be an issue

Broader Issues

- Not enough push culturally to increase proficiency in foreign languages
- Cognitive development – health and other benefits can accrue from learning languages
- Irish language is negatively impacting interest in other languages
- 1/5 of Erasmus student meet their partners on exchanges (highlight broader benefits!)
- Migrants - activate and upskill adult learners who may have poor English skills. This is often a problem when they are living in an English speaking country
- Motivation – proficiency in languages needs to be part of an individual's identity

Enterprise Supports/Awareness Raising

- Establishing culture clubs etc. to upskill Irish students would be helpful
- In context of Brexit, Ireland will be the only English speaking country in the European Union. However, it cannot be relied on that English will continue as the language of business in the future
- Need for awareness raising – range of opportunities in work place for people with languages
- Competition from other countries
- Coder Dojo for languages
- Value needs to be put on languages
- Raise awareness among parents and companies
- Work placements abroad

Appendix 1

Copies of the written submissions received (August – October 2014), and presentations made at the February 2015 and June 2015 forums are available on the Department of Education and Skill’s website at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Curriculum-and-Syllabus/Foreign-Languages-Strategy/>