

**Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026, launched by the Minister of Education and Skills, Richard Bruton, T.D. on Monday December 4<sup>th</sup> 2017.**

Foreign language enthusiasts were not the only ones waiting for this moment. The Irish government has finally published a Foreign Language Strategy concerning the teaching and learning of modern and heritage languages, initial and continuous teacher education, and student and teacher exchanges. Overall, the Strategy accredits languages a paramount role in school curricula, further education settings, and life-long learning contexts.

The Strategy comprises much needed actions, especially in times of political uncertainty. When the UK leaves the European Union, Ireland and Malta will be the only European countries with English as their national language. The need to keep abreast with the language competencies of other EU countries has never been more explicitly stressed by a Minister of Education.

When looking at the 100 action points that are at the centre of the Strategy, a holistic and realistic approach becomes apparent.

In primary schools, a new curriculum that promotes bilingualism (Irish and English) was introduced in 2016. For senior classes (third to sixth class), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) “will be asked to give consideration to including foreign languages” (p.24). At the moment, it is at the discretion of each individual primary school whether they offer modern language learning as an extracurricular activity. However, the need for languages in Irish primary schools becomes visible when looking at a report by the European Commission from 2012 stating that Ireland and Scotland are the only countries, where learning a modern language is not compulsory.<sup>1</sup>

For post-primary and third level, the Strategy offers more detail.

At post-primary level, it is expected to increase the uptake of modern languages studied up to Leaving Certificate Examination. As a consequence, more schools have to provide a variety of modern languages. Also, by 2026, the amount of Foreign Language Assistants in secondary schools is expected to double to 220 assistants. Furthermore, curricular specifications will be

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<sup>1</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education\\_culture/repository/languages/policy/strategic-framework/documents/key-data-2012\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/languages/policy/strategic-framework/documents/key-data-2012_en.pdf) [Accessed on 12/12/2017]

introduced for new learners of Mandarin Chinese and heritage speakers of Lithuanian, Polish and Portuguese. However, even though *Enterprise Ireland* has identified Arabic as one of the eight languages to be important for the Irish workforce, students taking the Leaving Certificate Arabic still need to prepare for it outside school hours since no school provides classes (see p. 26). The same accounts for Russian.

The number of students entering Higher Education to study modern languages as a major subject (or as part of other courses) shall amount to 20%, which is an increase from the current 4%. Also, the student exchange programme, Erasmus +, is hoped to be taken up by at least 50% of the student cohort. In 2016, 3,135 students took part in Erasmus + and work placements. By 2026, this number should increase to 5,400 (see p.25). Further, more possibilities shall be given to teachers for short-term teacher exchanges.

The Foreign Language Strategy foresees that the overall quality of teaching is to be improved, which should positively affect attitudes towards modern language learning and results in foreign language competence.

The Strategy highlights the steps that will lead to an acknowledgement, appreciation, and embracing of modern and heritage languages. It is now imperative to follow up on the proposed action items. The committee of One Voice for Languages is more than willing and delighted to offer its support to make the 10-year-plan become reality.