

A Comment on a Comment from OVFL!

I am grateful to OVFL for responding to a note of mine on Language Policy and for the courtesy of OVFL in sending me feedback. Thank you.

One danger for an Anglophone community is complacency in relation to standards of English and a belief that **acquiring competency in any other language is unnecessary**. Already it is clear that a growing proportion of our population are unaware of the past tense of the English verbs “to do” and “to see”. Many young people do not know their English adverbs from their adjectives!

To promote language skills and the resourcing of language studies I proposed the designation of **“Strategic Languages”**. This did not merit OVFL support – it favours “an inclusive approach that values all languages”. All 6,000 of them! Yet the Irish investment in modern languages in schools does have a pecking order. More than 60% of that investment is in the language French. The remaining investment is largely shared by German and Spanish. This pattern has not materialised by consideration of national strategic objectives. To define some languages as Strategic would bring over time a rationality to this pattern, increase investment and widen the choice. For example: the language Portuguese, a language of future strategic importance to Ireland, is not studied in Irish schools at all. To define it as Strategic would drive a resourced plan to promote it. I proposed this but OVFL do not support such a definition as all languages are equal! The recent employer survey lists languages in order of skill need here i.e. it identifies them in strategic order!

I also proposed that the languages of Ireland’s immigrant community be designated **“Community Languages”** in order to promote them and the resourcing of their study by the State. Non curricular tests are already available and recognised for EU languages. This could be extended to non-EU Community Languages, including Mandarin.

Modern languages are studied in Irish schools as typically part of a broad seven subject Senior Cycle. Good foundations are laid. Thousands of Irish citizens have Honours in Leaving Certificate languages. For many this is a dormant qualification. My proposal that a national strategy by ETBs, employers and Higher Education to transform that achievement into higher qualifications and competencies seems to have been totally misunderstood by OVFL. Perhaps I did not explain it well. For example I advocate the **ETBs** provide a national scheme of **Level 6 language** courses.

The OVFL response speaks of a “common first year” in Higher Education. I do not know anyone advocating this. What is being promoted – Maynooth is leading the way on this – is a less specialised first year and **a wider choice of first year subjects in HE**. Since this is the case I proposed that included in the wider choice, in a systematic way nationally, be language courses for all those who achieve Honours at Leaving Certificate and who wish to further build their language competence regardless of the discipline of the degree studies.

The emigration pattern of young Irish people in the last decade make it again clear that, although Ireland is part of the EU and the Eurozone, its links are with Anglophone countries globally rather than EU countries a Ryanair flight away. Inward investment here is largely from Anglophone countries.

The Irish Language faces serious challenges. One fact about it is that in the schools’ curriculum no distinction has been made since 1922 between native Irish Gaeltacht speakers and second language

learners. I believe this now to have been a serious mistake. (Other distinctions were made.) My proposal, which if carefully planned could be introduced in 2016, does distinguish Gaeltacht native Irish speakers. It is proposing an elite, selective, high status course for such native speakers and them alone. The OVFL response suggests widening the course to others and thus - in a well intentioned way - misses the whole point of the proposal!

Again thanks to OVFL for its courtesy and response even though we do not seem to be *ar chó-fhocal* about our proposals!