



**Submission to the Consultation on the
Draft Primary Language Curriculum
to include
Modern Foreign Languages**

June 2024

The Literacy Association of Ireland (LAI) aims to support and inform those concerned with the development of literacy nationally and internationally (teachers and educators at all levels and in a variety of formal and informal settings), encourage them in reflection and dialogue, challenge them in their practice and give public voice to their concerns through organising bilingual events such as conferences, seminars, workshops, courses, and webinars.

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Submission to the Consultation on the Draft Primary Language Curriculum to include Modern Foreign Languages

The **Literacy Association of Ireland (LAI)** welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the public consultation on the Draft Primary Curriculum Specifications. The current submission relates specifically to the draft specification for the inclusion of Modern Foreign Languages in the Primary Language Curriculum.

The Draft Primary Language Curriculum including Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) is an opportune development on a number of fronts. Specifically, we wish to note our support for the following emphases in the 2024 draft specification:

- The increased focus on supporting linguistically diverse classrooms
- The asset-based approach to acknowledging and valourising the contributions of multiple languages and cultures
- The increased focus on the potential for developing children's language awareness
- The heightened focus on commonalities and transfer across languages, advancing the underpinning theories of linguistic interdependence and commonly underlying proficiency (Cummins, 1981; Cummins, 2021)

In particular, we endorse the adoption of a plurilingual approach to the teaching of languages, in line with guidance from the research literature and policy at a European level. The introduction of a MFL offers the chance to have a more co-ordinated approach to language teaching and to utilise a plurilingual approach to teaching Irish (O'Toole, 2023), with attendant benefits for the teaching of English.

Notwithstanding the potential benefits of the 2024 specification, we wish to note a number of concerns. In our view, addressing these concerns would make the success of the new specification more likely. Our specific concerns include:

I. Lack of a full review of the Primary Language Curriculum (2015/2019)

Though we welcome the addition of an additional language to the curriculum *in principle*, it is imprudent to proceed with this addition without first reviewing the successes and challenges

experienced in the enactment of the Primary Language Curriculum for English and Gaeilge (2015/2019). At post-primary level, early enactment reviews are a regular feature of curriculum renewal. However, close to ten years since the publication of the Primary Language Curriculum for Junior Infants to Second Class (2015), no such review has been conducted. Early research on the Primary Language Curriculum has suggested significant challenges in its implementation (e.g. Mac Domhnaill & Nic an Bhaird, 2022; McGarry, 2017). This has also been highlighted in the Chief Inspector’s Report (Department of Education Inspectorate, 2022). Crafting a third language into the structure of the Primary Language Curriculum without any reference to the successes (or otherwise) of the first two languages belies good practice in curriculum renewal and evaluation.

Recommendation 1: Ensure a thorough review of enactment prior to layering a new curriculum language into the Primary Language Curriculum (2015/2019).

2. Reduction in time allocation for L1 and L2

In our submission to the public consultation on the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework, LAI noted significant concerns with the proposed reduction in the explicit time allocation for L1 and L2 (see [here](#)). Unfortunately, the publication of the final Primary Curriculum Framework did not allay these concerns, as the NCCA/Minister proceeded to reallocate time away from L1/L2. Despite this reduction in instructional time, no amendment has been made to the content of the learning outcomes for either English (L1/L2) or Gaeilge (T1/T2) set out in the Primary Language Curriculum. It is difficult to envisage or explain how these same learning outcomes can be achieved with *less* curriculum time. Furthermore, it is difficult to envisage or explain how the big ideas and pedagogical approaches set out in the introduction to the Primary Language Curriculum can be achieved within the very truncated time allocations set out. Of even more concern, the new time allocations for literacy places Ireland out-of-step with the literacy time allocations noted internationally, and, in particular, the time allocations adopted for children who require additional support in reaching their full literacy potential (e.g. children in disadvantaged settings; children who encounter difficulties in literacy acquisition).

Recommendation 2: Revise the decision to reduce the time allocation to literacy (L1/L2); resolve the apparent conflict that has arisen in leaving learning outcomes for L1/L2 unchanged while reducing the instructional time available for their teaching.

3. Limited conceptualisation and definition of *literacy* within the draft Primary Language Curriculum (2024)

The draft Primary Language Curriculum builds on the 2019 and 2015 version of the same specification in including the strands of reading, writing and oral language. However, there is no direct explanation of how literacy is conceptualised within the curriculum. As part of a broader review of the enactment of the Primary Language Curriculum, we urge that literacy is given more prominent attention within the specification. We also believe that more careful attention needs to be afforded to the research literature on high quality literacy pedagogy, including the need for explicit and systematic teaching.

Recommendation 3: Include a more specific explanation/definition of literacy in the curriculum, following an enactment review; ensure that all aspects of the Primary Language Curriculum relating to literacy are in line with current research.

4. Lack of clarity regarding the roadmap for ISL as a language within the Primary Language Curriculum

LAI notes that the NCCA has recently published an audit of Sign Language in the mainstream curriculum (O'Donnell, 2024), with further actions for Irish Sign Language (ISL) noted in Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024- - 2033. While we understand that ISL is *not* a modern foreign language, we urge that greater high-level consideration be given to how multiple languages can be incorporated into the curriculum in a considered and methodical manner.

Recommendation 4: Devise a broader road map for how Irish Sign Language, Modern Foreign Languages, Gaeilge and English will be conceptualised and operationalised in tandem in the coming period. Avoid the ad-hoc introduction of separate policies and initiatives relating to the respective languages.

5. Greater clarity on the conceptualisation and operationalisation of Modern Foreign Languages is needed

While MFL is described in the Draft as including '... *all* languages that support 'Building an awareness of languages and cultures' in Stages 3 and 4' (p. 1), greater clarity on the exact languages which will be acknowledged in the curriculum as a MFL is required.

LAI notes that a number of significant operational matters have not been addressed at this point. In the absence of clarification, it is difficult to envisage how teachers can engage meaningfully with the draft specification. We deem it imperative that the NCCA and the Department of Education addresses questions such as:

- How will a school decide on a MFL?
- Will all teachers in the same school need qualifications in the same MFL? If so, what happens in the case of substitute teachers / fixed-term teachers moving from school to school / relocation of teachers etc?
- In terms of initial teacher education, what MFL will Higher Education Institutions focus on in order to best equip their students for their future teaching careers? How will this align with Teaching Council accreditation requirements?
- Will entry requirements to teacher education now require a basic minimum Leaving Certificate grade in a MFL?
- Will sustained, language-specific professional learning be provided to teachers in relation to the teaching and learning of MFL and teachers' own language competence? How will teachers with no competence in a MFL be supported to acquire this competence?
- How will additional teaching supports (in English and Irish) or peripatetic teachers be used to support the enactment of a MFL?

Without convincing answers to the questions above, it is difficult to see how a MFL will be enacted.

In the entry requirements for initial teacher education courses for primary teachers in 2024 (CAO competition), there is no specific requirement for studying a modern foreign language (MFL) to pursue a B.Ed or PME. It is crucial to thoroughly weigh the language requirements for both English and Irish entry requirements for the B.Ed. When such requirements are required for those languages, we must evaluate a student teacher's potential proficiency in studying and teaching an additional language if there is no requirement to have studied or knowledge of a MFL. In addition, we must consider the effects of introducing the teaching of a MFL for in-career teachers. Significant DE investment in professional development will be required to upskill in-career teachers. Moreover, if changes were made to a student's requirements for entering ITEs, would there be an effect on the Teaching Council registration for in-career teachers?

Due to ongoing financial constraints, schools may find implementing new facets of a curriculum challenging. This is especially true following the recent implementation of the mathematics curriculum, which places a strong emphasis on hands-on learning experiences and has received no additional funding. The reduction of over 16% per child in the School Book Grant this year further exacerbates

the situation. With decreased funding, there is a pressing need for more resources to support the current curriculum before considering incorporating a new language learning component.

Recommendation 4: Further detail must be provided on the conceptualisation and operationalisation of a modern foreign language in the curriculum and related documentation. This must include a short-, medium- and long-term road map for its enactment, accompanied by credible resourcing and professional learning commitments from the Department of Education.

6. Conceptualisations of languages, bilingualism and plurilingualism in the Curriculum

Concepts of bilingualism and plurilingualism have evolved in recent years and moved away from the traditional binary view of native versus non-native speaker (O'Rourke & Ramallo, 2011) to an understanding that there is a continuum of bilingualism and plurilingualism (Baker & Wright, 2021), and that speakers draw on their repertoire of languages in different ways and in different contexts. There is also a growing awareness that people can communicate in a variety of ways (Barnes et al., 2022). This could be highlighted more in the draft framework.

Primary schools have a very important role in nurturing positive attitudes to the Irish language and in providing spaces for children to use their Irish in formal learning, outside the Irish lesson and creatively with their peers. There is both a need to (a) maintain separate spaces for different languages so that children have the opportunity to deeply process the target language and to (b) soften the boundaries between them (García & Lin, 2017). This demands nuanced and complex teacher pedagogical content knowledge, supported by clear curricular guidance.

Recommendation 6: The curriculum should more specifically address how its various languages will interact, informed by up-to-date understandings of plurilingual practice and consideration of the unique position of the Irish language within and outside the school system.

7. Increase emphasis on cultural connections

The Draft appears to place a major emphasis on the development of both languages and cultures. Such development, with a particular priority given to cultural development, is a crucial component to the successful acquisition process of any given second or third language. While in theory LAI supports the specific attention given to cultural awareness in the Draft, we caution that a focus on the same appears somewhat absent in the proposed Learning Outcomes. If teachers are expected to enhance an awareness of both languages and cultures and between languages and

cultures in primary classrooms, clear guidance is warranted on how exactly this is expected to materialise in the classroom.

Recommendation 7: More clearly outline the interconnection between language and culture in the curriculum and the practicalities of how to bring this to life in the classroom.

8. Clarity on implementation of CLIL

Stemming from objectives outlined in the 20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language (2010-2030), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is celebrated, and further recommended, by the Primary Language Curriculum (2019) as an effective pedagogy to support the teaching and learning of both content and a second language (Irish, in the case of the PLC (2019)). While the Draft appears to recommend a similar CLIL approach to enhance the teaching and learning of a MFL, it may be useful to collate data in relation to the implementation of the current CLIL Pilot Project (2023/2024), devised and implemented in schools in Ireland by the Department of Education, to further inform CLIL practices through Irish, prior to the recommendation of CLIL through a MFL. Extending CLIL to a third language, in the absence of this review, risks further complicating its enactment in schools.

Recommendation 8: Ensure that a thorough review of the current place and practice of CLIL is carried out prior to extending its application to a third language.

9. Exemptions from the Irish Language

Circular 0054/2022 denotes the changed circumstances in which a pupil, in primary school education, may be granted an exemption from the study of Irish, the second language of the school in English-medium schools. Some of these circumstances include:

- A pupil moving from a different country without previous experience of learning the Irish language
- A pupil who experiences significant literacy difficulties which are an obstacle to their learning across the curriculum
- A pupil who experiences a high level of multiple and persistent needs that are a significant barrier to the pupil's participation and engagement in their learning and school life
- A pupil in a recognised special school or class or who was previously enrolled in a recognised special school or class or who has a recommendation and has been deemed eligible for a place in a recognised special school and/or in a special class in a mainstream school
- A pupil whose parent(s)/guardian(s) is a/are diplomatic or consular representative(s) of another country to Ireland irrespective of age or educational history

In the case of a pupil with an exemption from the study of Irish in primary school, will this pupil be automatically exempt from the study of a MFL? There has been considerable debate on the provision of Irish exemptions in recent years. It is crucial that greater clarity is provided prior to the enactment of a third curriculum language.

Recommendation 9: Ensure that there is a clear, research-informed basis for the provision of exemptions to any language in the primary school system prior to the enactment of a Modern Foreign Language.

Conclusion

The LAI Executive Committee wishes to re-iterate its support, in principle, for many of the underpinning messages and values outlined in the draft specification for Modern Foreign Languages in the Primary Language Curriculum. We underscore our significant concerns about the diminution in time for literacy in L1 and L2 and the absence of a thorough review of current practice and curriculum enactment prior to progressing with a Modern Foreign Language. We look forward to continuing our engagement with the NCCA, the Department of Education and other partners in advancing a rich, meaningful and evidence-informed national curriculum for learners in all primary and special schools.

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