

Junior Cycle Modern Foreign Languages

Consultation Report

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1. Introduction

The Background Paper for the Review of Junior Cycle Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) was developed in 2015 and sought to provide a rationale and background for the development of the new common specification for French, German, Italian and Spanish in junior cycle. The paper began by presenting an overview of the current syllabuses and examinations, and then commented on the relationship between the syllabuses and current assessment practices. The paper went on to outline significant developments in language learning at European and national level which are relevant to the development of the new specification. It explored the experience of students in language classrooms, and presented some outcomes and trends regarding performance and uptake in the Junior Certificate examinations. It also considered criteria for language vitality before setting out the brief for the development of the specification. The draft BP was made available for consultation in June 2015.

2. The consultation process

The consultation process ran until October 9 2015. It consisted of an online survey, a consultation event and a student focus group.

2.1 The online survey

A survey was designed to capture responses to the Background Paper. The survey aimed to gather the views of teachers, parents, interested individuals and organisations, and students regarding the BP and brief. Respondents were invited to respond to 17 questions covering various aspects of the BP and to offer suggestions for the development of the new specification. A total of 160 responses were received. Of these, 134 responded as individuals, 13 responded on behalf of their school, and 7 responded on behalf of other organisations. The organisations included 2 cultural institutes, 1 university school of education, 1 MFL subject association, 1 group of PME MFL students, and 2 bodies responsible for promoting languages in education. Respondents could identify as belonging to more than one category: a respondent could be a teacher and a parent, for example. Almost 90% of respondents were, or had been, post-primary teachers of MFL. Parents (primary and post-primary) accounted for over 16% of respondents. Over 16% of respondents were either third-level MFL lecturers or teacher educators.

2.2 The consultation event

Forty people were invited to the consultation event, from across a wide range of interest groups to include parents, school managers, teachers and teacher educators. Twenty eight attended the event, which was held in the Ashling Hotel, Dublin on 14 July (see Appendix 1). The day-long event began with a brief presentation and consisted of a number of workshops exploring key aspects of the BP and brief. Participants were allocated to four groups constituted to ensure a broad range of perspectives in each. Each group was asked to respond to key questions similar in scope to the questions in the online questionnaire. Responses were

collated and later analysed with a view to including the views of the participants in the consultation report.

2.3 The student voice

The perspective of second-level students was also sought. In conjunction with Dr Paula Flynn, Trinity College Dublin and the Student Voice initiative, NCCA worked with a group of second and fifth year students in one school over three weeks. The purpose of this engagement was to consult students on their own experience of learning in Modern Foreign Languages. Although the sample was small, there was significant overlap with the views of online participants and those who attended the consultation event.

3. Consultation findings

3.1 The current syllabuses and examinations

Section 2 of the BP analyses the current syllabuses and assessment arrangements against the background of developments in communicative language teaching. Respondents to the online survey were asked to respond to a number of statements regarding the current syllabuses and examinations. About two thirds of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the themes and tasks in the present JC MFL syllabuses are relevant to students' needs and interests. But almost 70% did not believe that the present JC examination is an effective test of communicative competence. Neither did most respondents believe that the present examination promoted best practice in teaching and learning of languages. Over 90% believed that the lack of a compulsory oral examination is a weakness in the current arrangements. On the question of whether answering the comprehension questions in English or Irish (rather than the target language) was a weakness, views were more evenly divided, although the majority (53.2 %) believed that this was a weakness.

Thirty one respondents added their own comments on this section of the survey. The following extracts give a sense of the views expressed:

A weakness of the current syllabus is the delineation of skills. The acquisition of communicative competence requires a learning environment where there is integration of skills. In addition, in order to develop communicative competence the teaching and learning of Language Awareness and Intercultural Competence are just as important as the teaching of what are traditionally known as 'the four skills'.

A compulsory oral exam is needed. Professional development for teachers should be prioritised. The reform is so focused on the exam and not on the methodology. It doesn't matter what exam you put in place; what needs to change is what MFL teachers do and how we teach. We need CPD opportunities and autonomy.

The Key Skills of Junior Cycle together with a true communicative approach will breathe life back into a very stale curriculum. This can only occur if formative and summative assessment focus largely on speaking and listening primarily, and then reading and writing.

The views of students coincided with those of the online survey with some voicing dissatisfaction with what they saw as rote learning and lack of opportunities to speak the language they associate with the current syllabuses.

3.2 The purpose of learning languages

Respondents to the survey were asked to agree or disagree with the statement that *communication in foreign languages is a key competence for lifelong learning*. Over 98% agreed or strongly agreed. They were then asked to rank in order of priority a list of five purposes for learning languages: personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social inclusion, mobility between countries and employment.

Mobility between countries, personal fulfilment and employment were more highly ranked than social inclusion and active citizenship.

One of the questions asked of participants at the consultation event was, *why should Irish 12 to 15 year olds undertake a programme in MFL?* The answers were many and varied, and are helpful in outlining a possible rationale for the study of languages in Junior Cycle. The following is a selection:

Only an English-speaking country would ask this question!

Benefits of bilingualism: task-switching, multi-tasking, better feeling for words

Language learning develops cognitive skills

Citizenship: Ireland is now multilingual; it's harder to understand people with a different first language from you; EU citizenship also.

Language learning is fun!

The future of these young people is not always in Ireland

It will broaden horizons and opportunities — work, employability

Friendship/exchange opportunities

Multi-nationals are looking for multi-linguals

Age 12-15 is a critical stage, though the students at this stage may not yet appreciate the importance/benefits for their lives of learning languages

It's a key skill, recognised as such by EU and junior cycle statements of learning

The students who were consulted in the focus group had a rather limited understanding of why they were learning foreign languages. They did not cite citizenship or employment. However, they were very strong on the need to be able to speak the language as opposed to writing it. They were able to make a coherent argument for the primacy of oral interaction, pointing out that many of them will not choose an MFL beyond post-primary and they at least should leave school being able to converse on holidays in the language they've studied. As one student said,

I think we're learning it just for the books and the exam, but we're not learning it to speak it.

3.3 Making language learning more engaging for students.

Respondents to the online survey were reminded that the ESRI research¹ referred to in the BP indicated that students find language learning difficult and that many do not enjoy learning languages. They were asked to suggest how language learning could be made more relevant and interesting for students. One hundred and thirteen responses were received to this open question. By far the most frequently-made recommendation was for a much greater focus on oral communication in teaching, learning and assessment.

Assessment needs to change so that teaching and learning is based on a communicative approach and oral proficiency becomes the most important skill.

Setting tasks whereby students can see their progress, and by encouraging them not to compare themselves to anyone else, we all learn differently and at different paces.

Make Oral exam mandatory, assessed by external examiner NOT their own teacher and worth 25per cent of Junior Cycle. Remove meaningless role plays from Junior Cycle oral exam, focus on cultural aspect e.g. French song, DJ, a painting, news article etc. like documents in Leaving Certificate.

¹ ESRI (2009) Junior Cycle Education: Insights from a Longitudinal Study

Next came suggestions regarding more active, interesting learning activities that are relevant to students' lives and interests. The following excerpts are representative of the broad range of responses:

Less grammar and more engaging activities where students have to use the target language.

A much more integrated approach to the teaching and learning of all the languages so learners develop a greater awareness of how language works and of how to go about learning a language.

By viewing language as a means of communication accessible and attainable to all. It should not be seen as the preserve of the more able or academic student.

Include more opportunities to use modern technology i.e. use of online dictionaries using mobile phones in class, use of online language learning programs i.e. Duolingo, opportunities for self-sufficient learning.

The participants in the consultation event were clear on teachers needing to teach differently from the way they were taught themselves. *Variety* and *choice* were words used frequently when speaking about how learning methodologies should change for students. They highlighted that the focus should be greater on oral language, with students moving away from *learning from a book*. While they felt that grammar is still important they recommended that students learn points of grammar in context – as the need arises. They also pointed to the need for peer-to-peer teaching and for students to see the connections between languages. They felt strongly that there should be much more target language speaking in classrooms, by teachers as well as by students, and emphasised the necessity of learning about the culture of the target language country.

Students had a lot to say about how MFL could be made more interesting and relevant. They stressed the importance of making the specification relevant to their lives.

We couldn't speak to someone we'd meet from France or Germany or wherever. We could write them a letter but we couldn't speak to them!

We should be able to talk to someone our own age about what they do in their lives

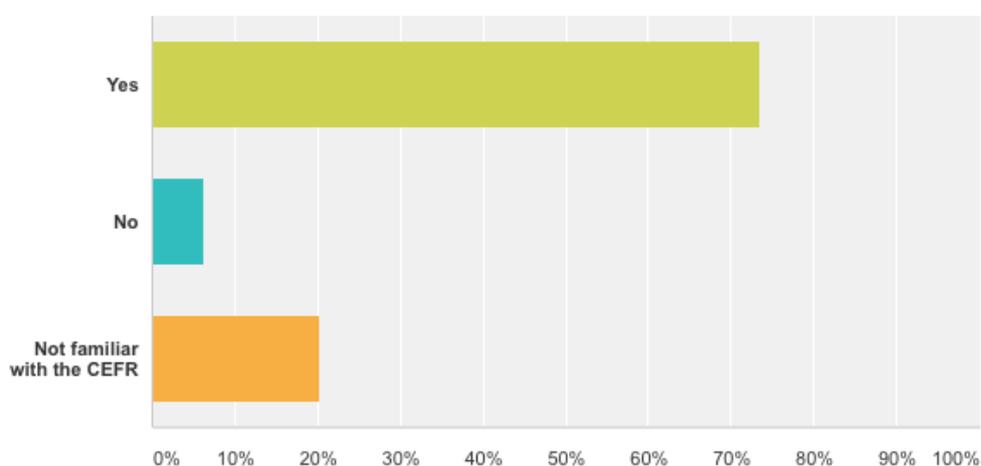
I think we should email them or skype them and like, talk to them about what they do in their country

Like, in grammar instead of saying 'learn that' (the teacher) should wait until a new word comes up and then we should learn about it

3.4 The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

Respondents were asked if they were familiar with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), and if they thought it should be more widely used in Ireland. Figure 4 shows the results of this question. Almost 20% of respondents were not familiar with the CEFR. Of those who were, the overwhelming majority thought it should be more widely used in Ireland. Of these, 73% were teachers.

Figure 4: Should the Common European Framework for Languages be used more widely?



3.5 Language learning portfolios

Respondents were asked whether a language learning portfolio, like the European Language Portfolio (ELP), would be useful to record students' progress in language learning. Just over 13% of respondents felt that they did not know enough about portfolios to express a view on the matter. Of those familiar with portfolios, four out of every five respondents believed that they would be useful to record students' progress.

Similarly, respondents at the consultation event felt that the ELP would play a useful role in the new Junior Cycle MFL.

A senior student also suggested that a portfolio would be a good way to show how much is learned, suggesting that a piece of oral work (recorded) as well as a piece of written work could be added to the portfolio periodically.

3.6 Aspects of language and culture in the new specification

Respondents were asked to indicate what areas of language and culture should be included in the new specification. They were given a list of ten areas to choose from and offered the choice of adding their own comments. Table 1 shows the percentage of respondents who thought that each of the areas should be included.

Table 1: Areas of language and culture which should be included

Area of language or culture	Percentage of respondents
Pronunciation	93.8
Grammar	86.92
The current position of the language	34.62
Poetry	34.62
Songs	85.38
Short stories	52.31
Social Media	79.23
Traditions and customs	86.92
History and Geography	72.31
Total respondents to this question	130

It can be seen that pronunciation and grammar headed the list in terms of priority, but that aspects of culture such as songs, film, traditions and customs, history and geography were also deemed important by the great majority of respondents.

This selection of comments is representative of the 35 submitted by respondents for this item and of the views of participants in the consultation event:

Students need to have competent literacy skills in L1 with regards to spelling, grammar, reading skills in mother tongue before consideration is given to emphasising literature in L2. If a student finds a language 'difficult', or has a language impairment in L1, focus of literature in L2 will further discourage students with regards uptake of modern foreign language.

We often don't have time to teach cultural awareness in our lessons because we have time constraints to teach to the exam because with the current syllabi

Also students will have to ensure they will be able to cope with the demands of senior cycle (essay writing/comprehension work) so I would not like to see the content drastically reduced. Students with the current JC build up their vocab and grammar knowledge and if this is not retained they will not be able to cope with the demands of senior cycle and this is what I have the most concerns about.

Modern themes should be included – bring the real world into the classroom

Students spoke about the need to learn more of the culture and ways of life of people in the country of the target language. They also favoured watching movies in the target language, and having a *skype buddy*. However the view was expressed that written language was also important, especially for those who would want to continue studying a MFL after Junior Cycle.

3.7 Teaching approaches and methods

Respondents to the online survey were asked to express their agreement or otherwise with a series of statements about the teaching approaches proposed for the new Junior Cycle. It is interesting that none of the statements listed below scored less than 80% agreement or strong agreement:

The target language should be the working language of the MFL classroom

Oral communication in the target language should be the main learning outcome for students

Appropriate digital technologies should be used as much as possible in language learning

Students need opportunities to extend language use beyond the classroom

Grammar should be taught and learned using an integrated approach

Exposure to a rich diet of authentic texts is important for students

Students should write simple authentic texts from first year onwards

Forty respondents added their own comments on aspects of teaching and learning. These extracts are representative of the comments:

Oral proficiency can only occur if the assessment becomes like that of Junior Cycle, where formative [assessment] is used to truly hone learning and values speaking skills, and shows this in assessment.

Oral communication should be the main aim, but not the exclusive one. Writing, reading and understanding are also crucial.

As much exposure to 'authentic' material as possible will allow for students to directly engage with language, grammar and culture. Students need to see the 'bigger picture' in language learning and that language is not limited to the classroom. If emphasis is on authentic material, this would be advised also for aural material at classroom level and exams.

As has been shown by a recent OECD study, overusing digital technologies is detrimental to learning. However, it needs to form an integral part within a wide variety of teaching tools.

Those taking part in the consultation event repeatedly emphasised the need to hear students talking more. They offered suggestions on everything from flexible seating to accommodate a range of learning activities, the use of ICT and apps to the use of methodologies borrowed from Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). They advocated problem-solving, working with others, mini-projects and increasing the number of language assistants available to schools.

The students who took part in the focus groups overwhelmingly supported the idea of 'more speaking', contrasting their learning in MFL to that of a toddler who learns language by speaking.

The students consulted felt that MFL classes are interesting when they get to work in pairs or groups. They learn a lot from each other and were cognisant of how time consuming it is for the teacher to speak individually to all students in every class. They also pointed to the

immediacy of feedback from a peer, whereas sometimes there's such a delay in receiving feedback from the teacher they've lost interest.

Senior students said there should be greater access to language assistants and speak highly of being immersed in the target language through courses and visits to the country in question. They also identified learning about the culture of the country as an important aspect of learning a language. Students say they like to learn from movies in the target language

One student in the focus group spoke passionately about being streamed in first year, citing the different pace at which students learn as a reason for schools to wait at least until after Junior Cycle before streaming students by level.

3.8 Assessment of oral language skills

Respondents were asked whether or not they agreed with the suggestion that all four language skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing—would be assessed for the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement. 95.2% of respondents agreed with the suggestion. Fifty three respondents made comments on this question. Almost half of these (23) expressed the view that assessment of oral skills should be external, not carried out by the student's teacher.

In the second question on oral assessment, respondents were asked to suggest what sort of oral assessment tasks they thought would be appropriate for the new Junior Cycle MFL. This was an open question, and 111 responses were received. Some of the suggestions were as follows:

General conversation, as in LC

No rote learning as in role plays

Presentation on self, using digital technology

Projects in class, with students working together and recording themselves speaking

Something similar to the present optional oral

Presentation and discussion of portfolio.

Opinions were divided regarding the merits of role play and also regarding the use of a format like that of the current Junior Cycle or Leaving Certificate oral examination. These comments illustrate the range of views expressed:

I think the current JC oral exam is a fantastic model as it gives sample questions both relevant to students' lives and interests as well as preparing them for trips abroad. The role plays are "real life examples" and relevant to what students would be doing on holidays, e.g. in a restaurant, in a train station etc.

Five minute oral maximum. No role-plays. These are not spontaneous and are merely learnt off by heart. They are not a good indicator of competence. Same for picture stories, these are merely an exercise in rote learning. General conversation on home, family, house, holidays. Maybe discuss a favourite photo etc. but not in great detail like a 'document' for Leaving Cert

The question of external assessment surfaced in comments such as the following:

Students will be assessed formatively on a day to day basis by their own teacher but I think that there needs to be a formal oral examination which is externally assessed. Students' oral communicative competence is of the utmost importance and should be treated with the same external assessment as the student's written work. If students of Woodwork, Home Economics, etc. can have their work independently assessed, why not students of modern foreign languages? There needs to be parity of treatment of subjects.

With regard to assessment, views on the day of the consultation event covered proposals for a portfolio similar the European Language Portfolio (ELP), the need to *remove the exam focus* and students taking greater responsibility for their own assessment. The CEFR was cited often as assisting in the assessment process *with its can-do statements*. *Variety* featured a lot in the groups with discussion highlighting the need for both formative and summative assessment. There was a strong feeling that the current oral exams are *staged* and participants felt that this aspect of MFL assessment needed to change.

On the subject of assessment, students in the focus groups were quite unanimous in their view that the oral should take precedence, although they understood that it was also important to be able to read and write in the target language.

Some students in the focus groups recounted their experience of rote learning in preparing for oral examinations. They got questions to complete before the oral and the teacher told them they'd be asked five of the questions,

..... so she stuck to the exact questions, she wouldn't go off base ... so everybody was, like, learning it off in their head ...

As regards formative assessment, there was agreement among the students that when feedback only is provided (as opposed to a grade only or a grade plus feedback) they are more inclined to take note of the feedback. They pointed to a practice this year in English where their teachers are doing this and their view is that it's been very successful in helping them focus on improving.

In the same vein, students spoke positively about some apps which allow them to self-assess and again provide immediate feedback. Students say they'd like to use more social media, and 'the letter' in the JC examination received particular criticism for being out-dated and in practice involving a lot of rote learning.

3.9 Assessment of listening skills

Respondents were asked whether they thought there should continue to be an aural assessment task in the new Junior Cycle. 97.62% of respondents agreed that there should be an aural assessment. This view was reflected in both the consultation event and in the student focus group.

3.10 Assessment of reading and writing

Respondents were asked to suggest what sort of reading and writing assessment tasks they thought would be appropriate for the new Junior Cycle MFL. This was an open question, and 99 responses were received. Many respondents were quite happy with the present JC format for reading and writing, except that the writing of letters and postcards should be

discontinued in favour of emails, blogs etc. Opinions were divided on the question of whether comprehension questions should be answered in the target language or in English/Irish, while many respondents favoured a mix of the two types. Some of the suggestions were as follows:

Reading comprehension questions could include a grammar question

A more modern writing task than at present—emails, blogs, social media etc. rather than postcards and letters.

Writing short paragraphs on a variety of themes, possibly as part of a portfolio

Reading of varied text types: news articles, poetry, fiction, non-fiction,

Writing: short fictional narrative would appeal to creative side of students

Reading articles on life in the target language country, articles which will appeal to young people—fashion, sport, celebrities etc.

Jumbled cartoon stories where pupils would match the caption (in L2) to the correct image, or cloze tests

Reading of authentic texts as a springboard for writing

A portfolio of written work in third year which could be corrected and resubmitted

Online material as texts for reading comprehension assessment

Some typical comments in response to this question were:

For reading I think comprehensions similar to the current exam work well. Questions on authentic texts (menus, timetables, advertisements, magazine articles, brochures etc.). However questions shouldn't all be asked and answered in English. Some target language questions and answers are important too. This would inevitably increase use of the target language in the classroom.

Questions should be asked and answered in the target language, from easy matching exercises, multiple choice questions, true or false. As well as ticking boxes as a warm up exercise, students should follow through and complete full sentences in the language. Students could label and describe photos/pictures.

No letter or postcard writing... Very out-dated! Maybe write a blog about themselves, write the story of an unseen picture sequence, describe something, practical tasks such as write an email to a language school, tourist office etc.

3.11 Additional views on the background paper

Respondents were invited to share any additional views they might have regarding the BP and brief. Sixty nine responses were received in this section of the survey. Alongside a broad welcome for the changes proposed in the BP and brief some concerns were expressed, most of which had already surfaced in the responses to earlier questions in the survey:

Some expressed the view that the introduction of a common level would disadvantage both the more able and the weaker students. As one respondent put it:

I have reservations about the paper being a Common level - will this lower the standard for stronger students, or make it more difficult for weaker students? This will be difficult to balance and needs to be carefully considered.

Many respondents reiterated the view that assessment of oral skills for certification should be external, not school-based.

Some respondents expressed concerns about continuity between junior cycle and senior cycle MFL and the need to *bridge the gap*. Some linked this concern with the introduction of a common level paper in the Junior Cycle Examination.

Many respondents emphasised the need for appropriate initial teacher education and CPD, and for investment of ICT resources in schools if the new specification is to make a difference.

4. Conclusion

Almost all those who participated in the consultation process expressed agreement with the general thrust of the BP and welcomed the proposed review. Particular recommendations for the development of Junior Cycle MFL are that:

- a stronger emphasis be placed on oral communication and that focus be reflected in the assessment of MFL as well as greater use of the target language in the classroom
- more engaging activities for students
- there be broad alignment of the learning outcomes with the CEFR
- grammar and pronunciation continue to play an important role
- greater emphasis be placed on cultural awareness
- the interconnectedness of languages be made more explicit

Appendix 1 Consultation event attendees

Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools

Association of Russian Teachers of Ireland

Dublin City University

Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board

Goethe Institute / German Embassy

Hibernia College

Irish Film Institute

Instituto Cervantes / Spanish Embassy

Junior Cycle for Teachers Support Service

Joint Managerial Body

Léargas

MFL Teachers

National Parents Council (Post Primary)

One Voice for Languages (OVL)

Teaching Council

University College Cork

University College Dublin

University College Galway

University of Limerick

Appendix 2 Organisations which participated in the online consultation

Northern Ireland Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (NICILT)

French Teachers Association of Ireland/FTA

Post-Primary Languages Initiative

School of Education

Goethe-Institute

Alliance Française de Dublin

First year PME MFL students in Trinity College

