NCCA

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta

Languages in the Post-primary Curriculum

A discussion document

November 2003

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Languages in the post-primary curriculum: a discussion paper

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Summary

This discussion paper begins by reviewing the current provision for languages in the post-primary curriculum: English, Irish and foreign languages. It then considers the challenges that the post-primary curriculum faces from four different sources: (i) the changing language situation in Ireland; (ii) internationalisation and Ireland's membership of Europe; (iii) two new tools recently developed by the Council of Europe to support language teaching/learning in its member states; (iv) current trends in language teaching.

The paper criticises the current curriculum on four interrelated grounds:

- There is no overarching language policy that provides for the inclusion of languages other than Irish in the post-primary curriculum. As things stand, there is nothing to guarantee that foreign languages will remain a significant part of post-primary education in the event that the National University of Ireland drops its matriculation requirement of Irish *and* a foreign language.
- We do not have an integrated language curriculum, but a series of language curricula that are largely independent of one another. Arguably this leads to an impoverished educational experience; it certainly means that curriculum planning is haphazard and piecemeal.
- The same Irish curricula are taken by the minority of students who are native speakers of Irish and/or attending Irish-medium schools and the English-medium majority for whom Irish is a second language. This situation is linguistically and educationally indefensible, and until it is remedied there is little realistic prospect of raising the levels of proficiency achieved by the non-native-speaker majority in Irish.
- Because we have neither a language policy nor an integrated language curriculum we have no criteria by which to manage diversification, whether that involves introducing new foreign languages or accommodating the mother tongues of newcomer students.

The paper also raises questions about (i) the sustainability of foreign languages in the absence of a language policy, (ii) the levels of communicative proficiency achieved by school-leavers, (iii) current language teaching methods, and (iv) current forms of assessment.

It recommends that consideration should be given to

- formulating a language policy on the basis of a thorough investigation of Ireland's language needs
- developing an integrated language curriculum based on a fixed amount of "curriculum space", perhaps divisible in a variety of different ways
- undertaking independent measurement of the communicative proficiency achieved by students in Irish and foreign languages at Junior and Leaving Certificate levels
- undertaking a survey of teachers and students in order to arrive at a better understanding of what happens in post-primary language classrooms
- experimenting on a small scale with projects that use the European Language Portfolio to (i) foster the development of learner autonomy, (ii) establish whole-school approaches to language teaching, and (iii) explore portfolio approaches to assessment
- experimenting on a small scale with projects that teach other subjects through the medium of a foreign language
- experimenting on a small scale with projects that make full use of media and information technologies to teach Irish and foreign languages.

The paper begins and ends by insisting that any proposals for change in curriculum and/or assessment should be validated in carefully controlled pilot projects before they are introduced as part of mainstream practice.

1 Introduction

In 1987 the Curriculum and Examinations Board (predecessor of the NCCA) published the report of its Board of Studies for Languages.[1] This brief but ambitious document initiated a process of sustained curriculum review and renewal. At the end of the 1980s new syllabuses were introduced for Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate Irish, and around the same time a common syllabus framework was adopted for French, German, Spanish and Italian; more recently syllabuses have also been introduced for Arabic, Japanese and Russian. A large part of the motivation behind this work has been a concern to promote the teaching and learning of languages for purposes of communication.

During the period since 1987 there have been a number of other language-related developments in the school system, none of them in any way dependent on the work of the NCCA. For example, Irish-medium schools have continued to flourish at all levels of the system, albeit on a modest scale; the educational exchange projects of the European Union have made a number of new possibilities available, at least in principle, to teachers and students; the introduction of the EU's European Language Label for excellence and innovation in language teaching has identified and rewarded a number of outstanding initiatives; the Modern Languages Initiative for Primary Schools has introduced foreign languages to the primary curriculum; and the Post-primary Modern Languages Initiative has pursued diversification by supporting the teaching of Spanish and Italian and encouraging the introduction of Russian and Japanese. Despite their variety all these developments are again centrally concerned with the communicative function of languages.

The importance of these developments should not be understated, but neither should it be exaggerated. The teaching and learning of languages in our post-primary schools is still beset with problems. Success in Irish remains a minority achievement; despite the "communicative revolution", foreign languages are still too often seen as belonging among the "more academic" school subjects, which makes them the preserve of more able students; and the structure of the curriculum itself is such that the very future of foreign languages is by no means assured. For these reasons alone it is timely to initiate a new round of questioning and discussion, but four external factors make it urgent to do so:

1. Increasing numbers of pupils at primary and students at post-primary level have a mother tongue other than English or Irish. Special provision must be made to help them gain linguistic access to the curriculum; and the question arises whether new mother tongues should be accommodated in the post-primary curriculum, and if so, how.
2. Our membership of the European Union, the rapid pace of globalisation, and the international role of English all raise important questions about the position of languages in the post-primary curriculum. At one extreme we might ask whether we need to teach foreign languages at all, given that English is the language in which so much international communication takes place. At the other, we might worry that our participation in international processes, inside and outside the EU, implies a need for significant and rapid diversification of the languages offered to post-primary students.
3. The Council of Europe has recently introduced two new tools – the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF)[2] and the European Language Portfolio (ELP) – to support the development of language teaching programmes, the teaching and learning process, and the assessment of communicative proficiency.
    - Major examining bodies across Europe and several national curriculum authorities have already adopted the Common Reference Levels elaborated in the CEF. These

[1] Curriculum and Examinations Board, *Report of the Board of Studies for Languages* (Dublin, 1987).

[2] Council of Europe, *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

offer a new approach to language curriculum design and assessment and a means of comparing levels of achievement from country to country. Whether or not they are allowed to influence the development of curriculum and assessment in languages at post-primary level in Ireland, the Common Reference Levels will impact increasingly on Irish school-leavers and graduates who seek to work or study in non-English-speaking European countries.

- First launched as a general concept in 1997, the ELP already exists in almost forty different accredited versions, designed for use in different educational systems, with learners of various ages. Ireland has played a leading role in developing and piloting the ELP, but so far the impact at post-primary level has been small. It is necessary to ask what formal role, if any, the ELP should play in the development of post-primary language teaching and assessment.

4 Since the communicative approach to language teaching was first introduced, the international research community has continued to explore the processes of second language acquisition and there have been significant innovations in second languages and foreign language teaching, some of which exploit recent developments in computer-mediated communication. It is appropriate to identify principal trends and consider their relevance to post-primary language curricula and assessment.

It is the purpose of this discussion paper to raise questions and suggest some of the ways in which they may be addressed, but not to propose detailed solutions. For one thing, the future of languages in the post-primary curriculum is a highly complex matter that can be adequately dealt with only on the basis of wide-ranging consultation involving all stakeholders; for another, that very complexity suggests that change of any kind should be piloted on a small-scale, and evaluated critically before change on a larger scale is attempted.

2 The current curriculum

As the Curriculum and Examinations Board recognised when it established its Board of Studies for Languages in 1987, any comprehensive discussion of languages in the curriculum must include not only Irish and foreign languages, but English as the first language of the majority of the population. As noted in the Introduction, the *Report of the Board of Studies for Languages* served as a springboard for the various acts of curriculum revision and development that began at the end of the 1980s. Accordingly, its key aspirations provide a benchmark against which to assess the present provision for languages in the post-primary curriculum.

2.1 Do we have a language curriculum or language curricula?

The *Report of the Board of Studies for Languages* defines the curriculum category "language" as follows:

> Language is
> - the chief means by which we think – all language activities, in whatever language, are exercises in thinking
> - the vehicle through which knowledge is acquired and organised
> - the chief means of interpersonal communication
> - a central factor in the growth of the learner's personality
> - one of the chief means by which societies and cultures define and organise themselves and by which culture is transmitted within and across societies and cultures.[3]

It is difficult to improve on this definition. At once comprehensive and precise, it is the basis for the report's argument that "language" should constitute a key curriculum area, and that the relationship between first, second and foreign language learning should be made explicit not just in the curriculum but in classroom practice.

The idea of an integrated language curriculum rests on the argument that educational systems have a responsibility to develop learners' skills in using their mother tongue, to teach them one or more other languages as a means of gaining at least limited access to other societies and cultures, and to give them a critical awareness of language as a rule-governed system of communication. However an integrated language curriculum also rests on the argument that languages, including the mother tongue, should be taught partly in relation to one another, so that students gradually develop a sense of their plurilingual identity (a key element in "language awareness"). Within an integrated language curriculum there are two reasons for teaching second and foreign languages: (i) to enable students to use them for purposes of communication; (ii) to give learners knowledge of what language learning entails, so that they are able to respond with informed awareness to the language learning needs they may encounter in later life. The successful implementation of an integrated language curriculum probably requires that "language" is allocated a fixed amount of "curriculum space" that may be divided up in a variety of different ways, according to the different and developing needs and interests of students.

Since 1987, despite the sustained focus on language learning for communication and the introduction of a common syllabus framework for foreign languages, there has been no progress towards the goal of an integrated language curriculum. For example, "language and literature" is one of the "eight areas of experience" that constitute the framework for the junior cycle curriculum.[4] Not only is this a much looser and less compelling concept than the 1987 definition of language cited above, it is less than fully reflected in the "required course" proposed

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[3] Curriculum and Examinations Board, *Report of the Board of Studies for Languages* (Dublin, 1987), p. 2.

[4] National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *The Junior Cycle Review. Progress Report: Issues and Options for Development* (Dublin, 1999), p.11.

"for the time being" by the Junior Cycle Review Committee.[5] This course includes Irish and English as separate subjects, but not foreign languages, about which it merely states that all students "should have access to the study of a modern European language".[6]

This proposal is worrying in two respects. Firstly, it evidently excludes the possibility of working towards an integrated language curriculum. Secondly, it confirms the precarious situation of modern languages in the post-primary curriculum overall. Students should "have access to the study of a modern European language", but such study is in no way obligatory. The fact that large numbers of Leaving Certificate candidates continue to take French may be principally due to the matriculation requirements of the National University of Ireland, which include a school-leaving qualification in Irish *and* a modern European language. In the absence of an obligatory, integrated and appropriately diverse language curriculum, a dilution of those requirements (replacing *and* by *or*) might turn out to have fatal consequences for modern languages at post-primary level.

At present languages are much better provided for at second level in Ireland than in the United Kingdom; for we have Irish *and* modern languages, and the breadth of our school-leaving examination leaves room for both. This has one happy consequence for third-level education. The great majority of students come to college having studied at least one, and sometimes two foreign, languages for five or six years. They are thus well placed to take advantage of the institution-wide foreign language programmes that have been introduced over the past decade. By contrast, in the UK most students embark on similar third-level programmes with no more than a GCSE qualification in one foreign language.

The fact remains, however, that we do not have a language curriculum, but a series of language curricula. Each language is taught as a subject in its own right, supported by a subject association, and there is little if any contact between languages. The situation that obtained in 1987 still obtains in 2003:

> There is no overall context which would help the learner to understand and relate the different kinds of language learning. There may be a lack of consistency in approach, methodology and terminology between the different educational levels and between languages. There is a risk of confusing the learner with a variety of language experiences which may result in lack of motivation, inefficient learning and reduced learner autonomy. This can adversely affect not only language learning but learning in general.[7]

This variety of language experiences will be confirmed by a brief consideration of curriculum provision for English, Irish and foreign languages.

2.2 English

In 1987 the *Report of the Board of Studies for Languages* proposed "language awareness" as one of the key dimensions of an integrated language curriculum:

> Language awareness could be formally implemented by the elaboration of a syllabus outlining areas of content, source material and methodology. The emphasis would be on teaching *about* language, and while this is appropriate at all stages, it seems particularly so in the senior primary classes and/or early post-primary classes. The course of study would build on the learner's experiences in English and Irish and prepare him or her both for foreign language learning and for the explosion of concepts and vocabulary in English/Irish to be encountered in post-primary learning. Areas of focus might include, for instance, how a language is learned (including strategies for language learning), language as system, the functions of language, language as communication,

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[5] Ibid., p. 22.

[6] Ibid., p. 23.

[7] Curriculum and Examinations Board, *Report of the Board of Studies for Languages* (Dublin, 1987), p. 33.

> language growth and change (including borrowing from other languages), creativity (including an examination of some features of literary language), social variation.[8]

This passage is very much of its time, and strongly influenced by the Language Awareness movement in the United Kingdom, which set out to address at least three problems: the absence of formal linguistic analysis in the teaching of English as mother tongue; the confusion that often arose in the minds of learners when teachers of different languages taught basic grammatical concepts in different ways; and the perceived need to provide students with a general preparation for foreign language learning.

Whereas the development of "language awareness" is prominent among the aims of the foreign language syllabuses, in the Junior Certificate syllabus for English it is mentioned just once, in paragraph 4.2.2:

> Language awareness skills: the student's awareness of the selectivity of all language use in establishing specific meaning; the ability to use the conventions of paragraphing, sentence structure, punctuation and spelling.

This version of language awareness, seemingly oriented more to rhetoric than to grammar, falls a long way short of the full-blooded language study envisaged in 1987. We are told (paragraph 1.1) that the purpose of the syllabus is to develop the student's "personal proficiency in the arts and skills of language", and that this personal proficiency "involves three dynamically interrelated elements: personal literacy, social literacy and cultural literacy". It is in the development of social literacy that "emphasis should be placed on fostering the student's knowledge of spellings, punctuation procedures, sentence structures and paragraph organisation" (paragraph 2.2.1) – words that clearly anticipate the mention of language awareness already cited. Many of the sub-goals of the syllabus and the learning activities by which they are likely to be achieved lend themselves to the development of basic skills of linguistic (rather than rhetorical, stylistic, structural or thematic) analysis. However such analysis is nowhere stipulated in the syllabus, and it is certainly not examined.

The Leaving Certificate syllabus for English does not mention language awareness at all. Paragraph 1.1 emphasises the ubiquity of language:

> Each person lives in the midst of language. Language is fundamental to learning, communication, personal and cultural identity, and relationships. This syllabus aims at initiating students into enriching experiences with language so that they become more adept and thoughtful users of it and more critically aware of its power and significance in their lives.

The syllabus aims to develop students' "knowledge about the nature and uses of language and the variety of functions and genres in which it operates" (paragraph 3.4.2) and their skill in "interpreting and controlling the textual features (grammar, syntax, spellings, paragraphing) of written and oral language to express and communicate" (paragraph 3.4.3). However, the syllabus does not require students to be able to describe or analyse those textual features; as in the Junior Certificate syllabus, linguistic analysis is neither stipulated nor examined. In these circumstances it is difficult to see how students can be expected to make "language awareness" links between English and the other languages of the curriculum.

In keeping with its conception of "language" as a curriculum area and its concern to do justice to language's communicative function, the Board of Studies for Languages emphasised the importance of developing students' listening and speaking skills in all language subjects. In the section of its report devoted to English it recommended that "increased attention [should be given] to the skills of listening and speaking" and that there should be "provision within the examination system for formal assessment of listening and speaking".[9] The Junior and Leaving Certificate syllabuses certainly acknowledge the importance of developing skills in

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8 Ibid., p. 47.

9 Curriculum and Examinations Board, *Report of the Board of Studies for Languages* (Dublin, 1987), p.14; see also pp. 54ff.

oral language. However, students continue to be assessed by written examinations only, which leaves teachers of English with little incentive to develop, for example, their students' oral presentation skills.

2.3 Irish

The teaching of Irish at all levels of schooling is bedevilled by two considerations in particular. Firstly, the number of pupils and students learning the language at any time far exceeds the number of native and accustomed speakers. This situation inevitably raises serious questions about the sustainability of the language in the longer term. Secondly, the continued insistence on a single syllabus for native and non-native speakers of the language, Irish-medium and English-medium students, achieves the worst of both worlds, offering the minority of native speakers and Irish-medium students what is effectively a foreign language syllabus while placing unrealistic demands on the majority of non-native speakers. The urgent need to remedy this situation was clearly recognised in 1987:

> It must be stressed … that the needs of Irish as L1 at post-primary level have been totally ignored, as at present there is no recognition in terms of curriculum and syllabus of any linguistic differences between learners of Irish as L1 and L2. The tradition of using the same Irish syllabus for native speakers of Irish and native speakers of English, in Irish-medium schools and in English-medium schools, has worked to the detriment of English speakers and Irish speakers alike. Syllabuses have made over-ambitious demands on English-speakers while they have failed to stretch Irish speakers as much as they should. A separate syllabus for Irish in Irish-medium schools must be a priority. Special attention must be given to learners of Irish as L1 and their needs across the curriculum in terms of materials and assessment must be catered for, particularly where there are problems of terminology. There is an urgent need for new courses in Irish for Gaeltacht and all-Irish schools which reflect the central role of Irish as the mother tongue.[10]

Though little has changed in the intervening decade and a half, there may still be time to recognise cultural, social and sociolinguistic facts and reshape the curriculum accordingly. Irish is a key element in this country's heritage and a significant part of its life today. It is thus entirely appropriate that the language should be an obligatory part of primary and secondary curricula for all. However, it is clear that schools cannot make Irish the preferred medium of daily communication for the majority of the population. If the needs of the native-speaker/Irish-medium population could be dealt with satisfactorily, it would be much easier to respond to the challenge of devising an Irish syllabus appropriate to the needs and interests of the majority, especially within the broader framework of an integrated language curriculum.

As it is, we continue with syllabuses and examinations that recognise the importance of oral communication but manage to retain an emphasis on reading and writing at the expense of listening and speaking. This may help to explain the apparently widespread practice of teaching Irish through the medium of English, noted in the Chief Examiners' Report on Ordinary Level Irish in the 2000 Junior Certificate examination.[11] The same report comments adversely on the generally low standards of proficiency achieved, mentioning lack of vocabulary, frequent resort to English, and poor grammar, syntax and spelling.[12] A recent study of students' metalinguistic awareness and strategies found that some learners had not grasped that Irish was taught as a modern language, had no experience of pair or group work (though these are recommended in the Department of Education and Science's guidelines), did not realise that they were learning a language in their Irish classes, and spent a lot of time on rote learning.[13]

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[10] Curriculum and Examinations Board, *Report of the Board of Studies for Languages* (Dublin, 1987), p.17.

[11] Department of Education and Science, *Scrúdú an Teastais Shóisearaigh, Gaeilge, Tuairiscí na bPríomhscrúdaitheoirí 2000* (Dublin, 2000), p.13.

[12] Ibid.

[13] M. Ó Laoire, M. Burke and M. Haslam, "From L2–L3: an investigation of learners' metalinguistic awareness and learners' strategies" (*Teangeolas* 38/39, 2000, pp. 52–59).

2.4 French, German, Spanish and Italian

English and Irish are obligatory subjects in junior cycle, and although it is not compulsory to take English in senior cycle, the great majority of pupils do so. In other words, English and Irish (together with Maths) are at the core of the post-primary curriculum. The very different situation of foreign languages has already been alluded to. Tables 1–7 provide a statistical overview of the situation as regards French, German, Spanish and Italian for the five years from 1998 to 2002. Tables 1–4 show the numbers of students taking Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations at ordinary and higher level in French, German, Spanish and Italian; Table 5 shows the number of students taking English, Irish, Maths and French in the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations; Table 6 shows the percentage variance in the number of students taking (i) Junior Certificate Examination overall and (ii) French, German, Spanish and Italian; and Table 7 shows the percentage variance in the number of students taking Leaving Certificate Examination overall and French, German, Spanish and Italian. Three things emerge from these statistics: (i) Tables 1–4 confirm the dominant position of French compared with German, Spanish and Italian; (ii) Table 5 shows that French is nevertheless some way behind English, Irish and Maths; and (iii) Tables 6–7 show signs of a decline in the numbers of students taking French and German that are roughly in line with the downward demographic trend (in the case of Spanish and Italian, the small numbers of students involved make it difficult to interpret the much greater variance – positive as well as negative – with any confidence). The Primary Modern Languages Pilot Project was launched in 1998 in approximately 10% of schools, offering the four foreign languages of the post-primary curriculum; it became the Primary Modern Languages Initiative in 2001. The Post-primary Modern Languages Initiative was launched in September 2000 and has focused on Spanish, Italian, Russian and Japanese. In due course, it will be interesting to see what impact these initiatives have on the numbers of students taking foreign languages, especially Spanish and Italian, in the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations.

Table 1: Numbers of students taking public examinations in French, 1998–2002

	Junior Certificate		Leaving Certificate	
	Ordinary	Higher	Ordinary	Higher
1998	13,797	32,013	19,457	17,628
1999	13,878	29,925	18,917	17,954
2000	13,411	28,651	19,189	16,785
2001	14,464	27,245	17,764	16,054
2002	13,367	27,156	16,904	15,212

Table 2: Numbers of students taking public examinations in German, 1998–2002

	Junior Certificate		Leaving Certificate	
	Ordinary	Higher	Ordinary	Higher
1998	3,543	12,043	4,138	7,234
1999	3,522	10,898	3,918	6,910
2000	3,810	9,944	3,830	6,410
2001	3,931	9,088	3,505	5,874
2002	3,895	8,382	3,552	5,170

Table 3: Numbers of students taking public examinations in Spanish, 1998–2002

	Junior Certificate		Leaving Certificate	
	Ordinary	Higher	Ordinary	Higher
1998	782	1,498	685	989
1999	730	1,401	552	1,007
2000	786	1,510	603	820
2001	635	1,245	612	871
2002	747	1,598	739	963

Table 4: Numbers of students taking public examinations in Italian, 1998–2002

	Junior Certificate		Leaving Certificate	
	Ordinary	Higher	Ordinary	Higher
1998	60	90	60	100
1999	107	140	72	138
2000	44	86	67	133
2001	58	134	40	102
2002	101	167	58	115

Table 5: Numbers of students taking the Junior and Leaving Certificate Examinations (ordinary and higher levels) in English, Irish, Maths and French, 1998–2002

	Junior Certificate				Leaving Certificate			
	English	Irish	Maths	French	English	Irish	Maths	French
1998	65,019	61,893	64,583	45,810	61,304	57,556	61,969	37,085
1999	62,165	59,095	61,745	43,803	59,804	56,426	60,637	36,871
2000	60,439	57,060	60,019	42,062	57,816	54,553	58,706	35,974
2001	59,495	55,856	59,184	41,709	53,283	50,825	55,149	33,818
2002	59,590	55,433	59,295	40,523	52,997	49,085	53,658	32,116

Table 6: Percentage variance in number of students taking the Junior Certificate Examination overall and French, German, Spanish and Italian, 1998–2002

	Junior Cert	French	German	Spanish	Italian
1998	-2.6	-3.6	-4.2	+13.6	-43.6
1999	-4.5	-4.4	-7.5	-6.5	+64.7
2000	-1.9	-4.0	-4.6	+7.7	-47.4
2001	-2.2	-0.8	-5.3	-18.1	+47.7
2002	+0.1	-2.8	-5.7	+24.7	+39.6

Table 7: Percentage variance in number of students taking the Leaving Certificate Examination overall and French, German, Spanish and Italian, 1998–2002

	Leaving Cert	French	German	Spanish	Italian
1998	+4.3	+8.0	+5.2	+28.0	+2.6
1999	-1.5	-0.6	-4.8	-6.9	+31.3
2000	-2.3	-2.4	-5.4	-8.7	-4.8
2001	-6.1	-6.0	-8.4	+4.2	-29.0
2002	-7.0	-5.0	-7.0	+14.8	+21.8

As noted in the Introduction, current syllabuses for foreign languages share a common framework at both Junior and Leaving Certificate level. These frameworks show the same concern for comprehensive but concise specification that is a characteristic of the 1987 *Report of the Board of Studies for Languages*. In their detail they are in direct line of descent from the functional-notional approach to language syllabus design pioneered by the Council of Europe in *The Threshold Level*[14] and its successors. The Junior Certificate framework begins with general educational and communicative aims, which it then seeks to embody in a coherent set of behavioural objectives elaborated as an inventory of tasks, activities and linguistic exponents. The Leaving Certificate framework adopts a similar approach. General aims are again followed by behavioural objectives, but these are now elaborated as a series of general activities/themes, for each of which the syllabus lists relevant linguistic skills and structures/grammar.

In addition the Leaving Certificate framework contains sections on language awareness and cultural awareness, which are elaborated as a series of general activities/themes, each with its

[14] J. A. van Ek, *The Threshold Level* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1975); see section 5.1 below.

own set of performance targets. The activities/themes for language awareness are: *Learning about language from target language material*; *Exploring meaning*; *Relating language to attitude; Talking and writing about your experience of the target language*; *Consulting reference materials (e.g. dictionaries and grammars) relating to the vocabulary and grammar of the target language*. The activities/themes for cultural awareness are: *Learning in the target language about the present-day culture associated with the target language*; *Reading modern literary texts (notably novels, short stories, poems and plays, or extracts from these) in the target language*; *Describing and discussing everyday life in the target language community*; *Understanding, describing and discussing aspects of the relations between the target language community and Ireland*; *Understanding, describing and discussing in general terms issues that transcend cultural divisions*.

In their general structure and content these syllabuses are firmly committed to the teaching and learning of foreign languages for purposes of communication; they are also up-to-date in the emphasis they place on the importance of developing students' language and cultural awareness and their insistence on the analytical dimension of language learning. However, although each framework describes clearly the communicative proficiency students are expected to achieve, it is not entirely clear how the senior cycle is intended to build on the junior cycle. If the two frameworks are considered together, the underlying dynamic seems to be that of an ascending and gradually widening spiral: tasks and themes should be revisited periodically, each time more expansively and at a higher level of complexity. However, this is not made explicit, and anecdotal evidence suggests that, for many teachers, the Leaving Certificate syllabus is quantitatively but not qualitatively different from the Junior Certificate syllabus: more of the same.

In the end all curricula must be judged by the effectiveness of their implementation; and in Ireland as elsewhere implementation is largely determined by the ways in which students are assessed. If our purpose in teaching foreign languages is to develop students' communicative proficiency in those languages (and that purpose is stated very clearly in both syllabus frameworks), it should go without saying that listening and speaking are no less important than reading and writing. The Junior Certificate Examination tests listening comprehension, but there is no test of oral proficiency; what is more, all comprehension questions are answered in English. As long as this situation persists, there is an inevitable risk that the pressure to achieve good results will tempt teachers to neglect spoken production of the target language. In the Leaving Certificate Examination there is a separate test of oral proficiency. The terms in which it is described suggest, however, that it may be seriously limited as a test of *spontaneous* oral proficiency. What is more, it takes place many weeks before the written paper, from which it is entirely divorced. No doubt this is the result of administrative constraints, but it is necessary to point out that it runs counter to communicative reality. When we learn and use languages in the real world our proficiency in writing and in non-reciprocal oral communication depends on but also helps to develop our proficiency in reciprocal oral communication. If we want this to be carried over into language classrooms, we must devise modes of assessment that do justice to the interdependence of language skills.

2.5 Other languages

In recent years syllabuses have also been developed for Russian, Arabic and Japanese using the frameworks described above. This raises three questions. Firstly, how are new languages introduced to the curriculum? Does their introduction depend entirely on the existence and determination of pressure groups? Certainly there seems to be no clear policy on the part of the Department of Education and Science. Secondly, do native speakers take these languages? If so, is it appropriate that they should follow what is essentially a foreign language curriculum in their mother tongue? Thirdly, is the introduction of new languages an entirely random process? For example, if we have Japanese, why do we not also have Chinese? Again there seems to be no clear policy.

Finally, it should be noted that besides the languages already mentioned, the curriculum makes provision for Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Dutch. The numbers of students taking the last three of these languages are tiny, but more students take Latin than Italian at Junior Certificate (594 compared with 268 in 2002), while the numbers for both languages are closely similar at Leaving Certificate. Although the three ancient languages have been largely excluded from the communicative debate of the past fifteen years, there is no reason in principle why they should have been. However, elaboration of this point lies beyond the scope of this paper.

2.6 Issues for discussion

This brief review of current provision for languages in the curriculum suggests that the following issues require discussion:

- *Language policy.* We lack a language policy for post-primary education in Ireland. Irish is an obligatory subject in junior and senior cycles, but foreign languages are not. Even at Junior Cycle level students "should have access to the study of a modern European language" but are free not to learn a language other than Irish if they choose not to. As we shall see, this situation sits uncomfortably with European Union language policy. A coherent language education policy should be based on an extensive analysis of Ireland's present and future language needs, undertaken according to internationally accepted standards.[15] A coherent language education policy would have important implications for students with special needs, but these lie beyond the scope of the present paper.
- *An integrated approach to language in the curriculum.* This was the central recommendation of the Board of Studies for Languages in 1987, but it seems to have been ignored without serious discussion. The key argument in favour of such an approach is encapsulated in the Board's definition of the curriculum area "language":[16] the centrality of language to human experience. The adoption of an integrated approach would enrich the experience of learning and studying languages—the mother tongue as well as second and foreign languages—by explicitly establishing multiple points of contact and cross-fertilization. The introduction of an integrated language syllabus would have clear implications for the English syllabuses and their assessment; it would also encourage the grouping of other curriculum subjects into broad areas.
- *Separate curricula for native and non-native speakers of Irish (Irish-medium and English-medium schooling).* This would be an inevitable consequence of an integrated approach to language in the curriculum, the rationale for which depends partly on distinguishing clearly between first, second and foreign languages. Even in the absence of an integrated approach, the present situation is illogical and disadvantageous to native and non-native speaker students alike and should be addressed as a matter of urgency.
- *Clarification of the status of foreign languages.* Large numbers of students will continue to take school-leaving exams in foreign languages (mostly French) for as long as the National University of Ireland's matriculation requirements include Irish *and* a foreign language. If that requirement were to change, however, it is at least possible that foreign languages would suffer the same fate as Latin did when it ceased to be a university matriculation requirement. The formulation of a national language policy for the post-primary curriculum and/or the adoption of an integrated approach to language in the curriculum would necessarily resolve this problem in one way or another.

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[15] See, for example, K. Sajavaara, R. D. Lambert, S. Takala and C. A. Morfit (eds), *National foreign language planning: practices and prospects* (Jyväskylä: Institute for Educational Research, 1993) and R. D. Lambert (ed.), *Language planning around the world: contexts and systematic change* (Washington, DC: National Foreign Language Center, 1994).

[16] Cited p.6 above.

- *Introducing new languages*. The lack of a clear policy governing the introduction of new languages to the curriculum inevitably means that diversification is haphazard rather than planned. Furthermore, because we lack an integrated approach, new languages must compete with those that are long-established. In clarifying the status of foreign languages and providing a rationale for the introduction of new languages, it may be worth reconsidering five options offered for discussion in the *Report of the Board of Studies for Languages*:

  i) the learner is offered a choice of at least two foreign languages, at least one of which is taken throughout the school period
  ii) the learner takes one foreign language throughout the school period and takes an additional language at senior cycle (or before this where possible)
  iii) the learner takes one foreign language in the junior cycle and then switches to another language in the senior cycle
  iv) the learner takes an integrated studies course (e.g. European Studies) which contains several language modules
  v) where constraints (e.g. pressures on the timetable) do not allow a second foreign language to be offered, a language other than French is offered, for example, on a rota basis[17]

- *Independent evaluation of the effectiveness of current curricula in Irish and foreign languages*. The curricula for Irish and foreign languages currently in force emphasise the development of communicative proficiency. The extent to which their implementation achieves this will remain unclear until independent tests of communicative proficiency are administered to appropriate samples of students taking Junior and Leaving Certificate Examinations.

These issues will be returned to in various ways in the sections that follow.

[17] Curriculum and Examinations Board, *Report of the Board of Studies for Languages* (Dublin, 1987), pp. 29ff.

3 The language situation in Ireland

Any review of the role of language in the post-primary curriculum must take account of the country's current language profile. Until recently the situation seemed clear enough: English was the mother tongue of the majority, Irish the first official language and mother tongue of the minority, and other languages were mostly brought here by temporary residents, especially diplomats. Now Ulster Scots is recognised as a regional or minority language under the terms of the Council of Europe charter for regional or minority languages, and the past decade has seen three other important developments. Firstly, the Department of Education and Science has effectively acknowledged the full linguistic status of Irish Sign Language; secondly, the recognition gained in recent years by the Traveller community has helped to stimulate interest in Irish Traveller Cant as a largely unknown part of Ireland's linguistic and cultural heritage; and thirdly, the arrival of significant numbers of newcomers—refugees, asylum seekers, and holders of work permits—has dramatically increased the number of languages in our midst. However, before turning to these three developments, it is necessary to return briefly to the situation of Irish.

3.1 Irish

As the first official language of the state Irish is appropriately a core curriculum subject that takes up a significant proportion of teaching and learning time both at primary and at post-primary level. Yet only a minority of non-native speaker students leave school with the capacity to participate in social or cultural events conducted through the medium of Irish. For the majority, learning Irish is perceived as a necessary evil, a price one pays for citizenship perhaps, but essentially a waste of time. One of the central goals of the post-primary curriculum should be to remedy this situation and thus do justice to the enduring importance of the Irish language.

Section 2.3 drew attention to the illogicality of requiring native and non-native Irish speakers, Irish-medium and English-medium students to follow the same curriculum, and argued that if the needs of native speakers/Irish-medium schooling were satisfactorily addressed it would be much easier to confront the problem of devising an Irish syllabus appropriate to the needs of the non-native-speaker English-medium majority. Such a syllabus must take account of the fact that all native speakers of Irish are also native speakers of English; it cannot be based on the notion of communicative need that tends to shape foreign language syllabuses since no one *needs* Irish to order a drink in a Gaeltacht pub or reserve a room in a Gaeltacht hotel. At the same time, language learning can succeed only if it is driven by a communicative purpose; in other words, the situation of Irish requires a curriculum that is based on plausible communicative goals. To begin with, those goals can be found only in the school itself, from the beginning of primary level onwards.

3.2 Irish Sign Language

Irish Sign Language (ISL) is the preferred language, and in some cases the mother tongue, of about 5,000 deaf people in Ireland.[18] According to Bergman,[19] for every deaf person who uses a sign language there are likely to be approximately nine hearing people who know the language to a greater or lesser degree—family members, friends, teachers of the deaf, interpreters, etc.—which means that there are probably about 50,000 ISL users altogether. ISL is a fully developed language in its own right, related to other sign languages (British Sign Language, American Sign Language), but distinct from them in grammar and lexicon. The full linguistic status of sign languages is confirmed by two facts. Firstly, a deaf child who is ex-

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[18] P. Matthews, *The Irish Deaf Community, Volume 1: Survey report, history of education, language and culture* (Dublin: Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann, 1996).

[19] B. Bergman, Paper presented at the Official Opening of the European Union/Council of Europe European Year of Languages (Lund, Sweden, 2001).

posed to a sign language acquires it in much the same way as a hearing child acquires speech; in particular, the process of acquisition is characterised by clearly defined developmental stages. Secondly, sign languages can be described and analysed using the same categories and techniques as are applied to spoken languages.[20] ISL is quite independent of English and Irish, and should not be confused with the system known as Signed English, which is used to provide word-for-word translations of spoken English.

Deaf children tend to be born to hearing parents and in due course themselves to have hearing children. This fact helps to explain two contrasting views of deafness. From the perspective of the hearing parent deafness is a handicap, since it impedes the normal development of the child as a member of the hearing community; whereas, from the perspective of the deaf person who has a fully developed proficiency in sign language, deafness is more appropriately perceived as a cause of linguistic and cultural difference. These two views of deafness are reflected in two diametrically opposed approaches to the education of the deaf. If deafness is seen as a handicap, the purpose of education is to overcome that handicap as far as possible, so that the deaf child can take his or her place in hearing society. Accordingly, speech is the preferred medium of communication, and much time is devoted to teaching articulation and the inexact science of "lip reading". In the case of profoundly deaf children, little progress may be made over many years, which inevitably restricts their educational achievement. If, on the other hand, deafness is seen as a cause of linguistic difference, sign language becomes the primary medium of teaching and learning. Although the written language of the hearing community plays an essential supporting role, it does so as a second language rather than an imperfectly acquired mother tongue.

Historically the schools for the deaf in Ireland played a central role in the evolution of ISL, since they provided the means of bringing deaf people together in a community. But in the 1940s the schools adopted the principle of "oralism", and for many years signing was discouraged by a regime of corporal punishment.[21] As a result, many generations of deaf students were condemned to limited educational success. Over the past two decades this situation has begun to change. The Irish Deaf Society has come to provide a focal point for the deaf community on a national level and organises a wide range of social and cultural activities that are conducted through ISL; the schools for the deaf have abandoned strict oralism and encourage rather than punish the use of ISL; and the first steps have been taken in the complex and long-term task of compiling a full linguistic description of ISL.[22] Official recognition of these efforts has been slow to come, but in 2000 the Department of Education and Science approved the establishment of a Model School for the Deaf, which delivers primary education through the medium of ISL; and in the same year the Higher Education Authority funded a Centre for Deaf Studies as a five-year pilot project in Trinity College Dublin. The Centre provides two-year full-time diploma courses in ISL-English Interpreting, ISL Tutoring, and Deaf Studies. Each of these courses is designed to promote communication between the deaf and

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[20] On the acquisition of sign languages by children, see (for example) L. A. Petitto, "The acquisition of natural signed languages: lessons in the nature of human language and its biological foundations" (in C. Chamberlain, J. P. Morford and R. I. Mayberry (eds), *Language acquisition by eye*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000) and L. B. Karnopp, "Phonology acquisition in Brazilian Sign Language" (in G. Morgan and B. Woll (eds), *Directions in sign language acquisition*, Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2002). On the linguistic analysis of sign languages, see (for example) M. Deuchar, *British Sign Language* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984) and R. Sutton-Spence and B. Woll, *The linguistics of British Sign Language – an introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[21] P. McDonnell and H. Saunders, "Sit on your hands. Strategies to prevent signing" (in R. Fischer and H. Lane (eds), *Looking back: a reader on the history of deaf communities and their sign languages*, Hamburg: Signum Press, 1993).

[22] For example, P. McDonnell, *Verb categories in Irish Sign Language* (Ph.D. thesis, Trinity College Dublin, 1997) and L. Leeson, *Aspects of verbal valency in Irish Sign Language* (Ph.D. thesis, Trinity College Dublin, 2002).

hearing communities and improve the deaf community's access to the processes of a predominantly hearing society. In addition to these developments, ISL is now offered in the Leaving Certificate Applied programme and a number of schools include ISL in their transition year programme. There is, however, an almost total lack of teaching/learning materials.

3.3 Irish Traveller Cant

Irish Traveller Cant (also known as Gammon and Shelta) has three things in common with Irish Sign Language: it is the language of a cultural minority; the majority of the population is unaware of its existence; and it raises important educational issues.

In its present-day form Cant uses a somewhat simplified version of the syntax of Hiberno-English with a vocabulary that is in large part Irish. The origins and early history of the language are obscure, though its antiquity is not in doubt. For example, the word *olomi* ("night") occurs in both Cant and Ogham, and the word *karb* ("old woman") occurs in both Cant and Old Irish but is obsolete in modern Irish.[23] It is possible that Cant began as an entirely independent language that gradually developed towards its present form under the pressure of contact with Irish and Hiberno-English.

Historically Cant has been a secret language, used by Travellers not only as a badge of group membership but as a medium of communication inaccessible to the settled community. This helps to explain why it is not taught in schools, written in books, or heard on radio and television;[24] it also helps to explain why it has been largely ignored by the academic community.[25] Now in decline, Cant should nevertheless find a place in our education system as part of Ireland's linguistic and cultural heritage, as a focus for intercultural learning, and as an illustration of productive language contact with both Irish and English.[26] Awareness of Cant should also inform the special educational provision made for the children of the Traveller community.

3.4 "New" languages

There are no official statistics on the number of "new" languages that have come to Ireland in the course of the last decade. However, 761 asylum seekers surveyed on behalf of the VEC, mostly in the Dublin area, had 63 mother tongues between them, of which the most frequently reported were: Romanian (24%), Yoruba (11%), Russian (8%), Arabic (7%), French (5%), English (4%), Moldovan (4%), Polish (3%), Ibo (2%), Albanian (2%).[27] And in 2002 the 399 adult newcomers with refugee status who attended full-time language classes with Integrate Ireland Language and Training[28] were drawn from 50 nationalities, the most frequently repre-

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23 I owe these examples to Marian Browne, from a speech made at the launch of *Can't lose Cant*, 8 April 2003.

24 A. Binchy, "Travellers' language: a sociolinguistic perspective" (in M. McCann, S. Ó Síocháin and J. Ruane (eds), *Irish Travellers: culture and ethnicity*, Queen's University of Belfast, Institute of Irish Studies, 1994), p.134.

25 See, however, two collections of papers published by Queen's University Belfast: M. McCann, S. Ó Síocháin and J. Ruane (eds), *Irish Travellers: culture and ethnicity* (1994) and J. M. Kirk and D. P. Ó Baoill (eds), *Travellers and their language* (2002).

26 We already have an impressive example of this at primary level, the book *Can't lose Cant* (Sligo: Kids' Own Publishing Partnership, 2003), which was produced by a project led by Marian Browne of the Department of Education and Science and involving pupils from the Traveller and settled communities attending Scoil Mhuire Junior and St Conleth's and Mary's School, Newbridge, Co. Kildare.

27 T. Ward, *Asylum Seekers in Adult Education. A study of language and literacy needs* (Dublin: City of Dublin VEC and County Dublin VEC, 2002), pp. 5ff.

28 Integrate Ireland Language and Training, a not-for-profit campus company of Trinity College, was established in 2001, following a successful two-year pilot project as the Refugee Language Support Unit. IILT advises the Department of Education and Science on issues relating to non-nationals and

sented of which were: Congolese (10.5%), Romanian (10.5%), Vietnamese (9%), Afghan (7%), Iraqi (7%), and Angolan (6%). Since all children and adolescents resident in the state are required to attend school regardless of the status of their parents, many of these nationalities, and thus their languages, are now present in our educational system. What is more, global migration trends and the impending enlargement of the European Union will ensure that Ireland's school-going population remains multinational, multilingual and multi-ethnic. This raises three important issues for the post-primary curriculum.

Firstly, we must seek to ensure that newcomers are appropriately integrated in the educational system. This is partly a social issue, and one on which many schools have already developed their own policy and practice. But it is also an educational issue: the curriculum must acknowledge the existence of otherness and show how it can be used to enrich the educational experience of *all* pupils and students. The NCCA has taken the first steps in this direction by setting up a steering committee for Interculturalism in the Curriculum and charging it with developing curriculum guidelines.

Secondly, the curriculum must provide linguistic access to education for post-primary students whose mother tongue is not English or Irish. For several years the Department of Education and Science has funded additional teachers or teaching hours in order to develop the English language proficiency of non-English-speaking non-national pupils and students; and, since 2000, Integrate Ireland Language and Training has provided support for these teachers in the form of teaching materials, planning and assessment instruments, and regular in-service seminars. Although much has been achieved in the past three years, much remains to be done. For one thing, materials and instruments developed to date need to be expanded into a curriculum for English as a Second Language that can be deployed flexibly, according to the needs of individual learners, within a larger language curriculum. For another, a way must be found of professionalising the language support teacher's role, so that we do not lose the wealth of expertise that has been accumulated.

Thirdly, we must confront the issue of language rights. It is now widely accepted that governments have a responsibility to ensure that all their native-born citizens have access to education in their mother tongue. This principle was first applied to linguistic and ethnic minorities, but sooner rather than later we must decide whether and how far it applies to newcomers. Obviously we cannot provide the whole of primary and post-primary education simultaneously through more than sixty different languages; and even if we could, such a policy would almost certainly have undesirable social effects; but should we expect newcomers to forfeit all linguistic rights? Currently the Department of Education and Science funds mother-tongue classes organised by immigrant communities themselves as a way of ensuring that the children of those communities develop at least basic literacy skills in their mother tongue. But is this enough? Should we be looking for ways of bringing at least this minimal degree of mother tongue support into the curriculum as part of schooling?

3.5 Issues for discussion

The following issues for discussion arise from this brief review of the current language situation in Ireland:

- *The sociolinguistic situation of Irish*. The development of a post-primary Irish syllabus specifically for non-native speakers must begin by recognising political and sociolinguistic reality and basing the syllabus on communicative purposes appropriate to that reality. This difficult task may be easier to achieve if it is undertaken as part of a larger review leading towards the establishment of an integrated language curriculum.
- *Raising awareness of Irish Sign Language*. The education of the deaf through ISL and written English is a specialist undertaking that lies beyond the scope of this discussion

language. It provides full-time language courses for adults with refugee status and a programme of support for teachers of English as a second language at primary and post-primary levels.

paper. However, the post-primary curriculum should include measures aimed at dispelling society's widespread ignorance of the existence of ISL and its linguistic status. Such measures could include a language awareness course of the kind envisaged in the *Report of the Board of Studies for Languages*[29] and a transition year project on the deaf community and its language (as noted above, a number of schools have already implemented this latter option).

- *Raising awareness of Irish Traveller Cant*. The post-primary curriculum should include measures aimed at dispelling the widespread ignorance of the existence of Irish Traveller Cant. Such measures could include a language awareness course and a transition year project on Irish Traveller Cant.
- *Meeting the English language needs of newcomers*. Over the past three years much progress has been made towards the development of a curriculum for English as a Second Language. This now needs to be formalised and given its place within the larger post-primary curriculum. Consideration should also be given to the issue of mother tongue support for newcomer students and whether it should be accommodated in the curriculum. Both these processes are likely to be easier to manage within an integrated language curriculum.
- *Language awareness in pre-service teacher education*. Consideration should be given to including an obligatory language awareness module in programmes of pre-service teacher education. Such a module would explore the developing language situation in Ireland and its consequences for all teachers, not just those specially appointed to teach English as a second language.

[29] Curriculum and Examinations Board, *Report of the Board of Studies for Languages* (Dublin: Curriculum and Examinations Board), pp.46ff.

4 The challenge of internationalisation

4.1 The international role of English

It is sometimes argued that, since English is already a global lingua franca, it is unnecessary for native speakers of English to spend time learning other languages. This view is seriously misguided on two counts. Firstly, it assumes that language serves a predominantly transactional purpose and ignores or dismisses the importance of language learning as the means by which we gain access to other societies and cultures. Secondly, it overlooks the fact that English is infinitely far from being a universal language. However much speakers of other languages may use English for purposes of international communication, they will continue to use their mother tongues at home; and those mother tongues will continue to provide the foundation for significant political, social, economic and cultural institutions. In Ireland and the United Kingdom, the notion that "English is enough" encourages the view that we no longer need to worry too much about teaching foreign languages in our schools, while, in other European countries, the same notion threatens to undermine curriculum languages other than English.

Before summarising the view of the European Union and the Council of Europe that English is not enough, it is necessary to note three consequences of the global status of English. Firstly, it confers an undeniable advantage on native speakers of English in many areas of international encounter and debate. For example, English long ago displaced French as the preferred language of diplomacy; and in many academic disciplines, especially the physical sciences, publication in English is a sine qua non for professional advancement. Secondly, its global role means that English will be the first foreign language in all European countries for the foreseeable future. It has long had that status in western Europe, and, since 1989, it has rapidly gained the same status in the new democracies of central and eastern Europe, displacing Russian and other historically dominant foreign languages, like German in the Czech Republic and Poland. Thirdly, the very fact that English is a global lingua franca often gives it something approaching second language status, and this makes it easier to learn. In many continental European countries English is part of daily life—via satellite television, pop culture, computer games, etc.—in a way that French and German are not part of daily life in Ireland. This, rather than superior teaching methods or textbooks, explains the high levels of proficiency that so many European school-leavers achieve in English (the fact that English has a greatly reduced inflexional morphology also helps). These considerations mean that language education policy cannot be the same in English-speaking as in non-English-speaking countries; but at least within Europe it should be guided by the same principles.

4.2 Ireland's membership of Europe

Ireland is one of the ten states that together founded the Council of Europe in 1949; and in September 2002 it signed the Extended Partial Agreement that confers on it membership of the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz (founded in 1994), whose function is to implement Council of Europe language policies and promote innovative approaches to the learning and teaching of modern languages.[30] Ireland joined the European Community (now the European Union) in 1973. As a member of both organisations Ireland is party to countless resolutions aimed in one way or another at the promotion of language learning and teaching.

The Council of Europe has always stood for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Its principal instruments are the European Convention on Human Rights, the European Court of Human Rights, and the European Cultural Convention; and its cultural/educational agenda is concerned with mutual tolerance and understanding, education for democratic citizenship, and lifelong learning. These concerns are clearly reflected in the three paragraphs in which the

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[30] The ECML's extensive website is at <www.ecml.at>.

Council of Europe's website explained the purpose of the European Year of Languages (2001):

- to increase awareness of Europe's linguistic heritage and openness to different languages and cultures as a source of mutual enrichment to be protected and promoted in European societies;
- to motivate European citizens to develop plurilingualism, that is, to achieve a degree of communicative ability in a number of languages, including those less widely used and taught, for improved mutual understanding, closer co-operation and active participation in European democratic processes;
- to encourage and support lifelong language learning for personal development and so that all European citizens can acquire the language competences necessary to respond to economic, social and cultural changes in society.

The European Union differs from the Council of Europe in its purpose (economic and political integration) and its membership. Whereas the Council of Europe currently has 44 member states, the European Union has 15, though this number will increase to 25 in May 2004. Nevertheless the European Union's website explained the purpose of the European Year of Languages in terms that were closely similar to those used by the Council of Europe:

- Linguistic diversity is a key element of Europe's cultural heritage and will remain so. Embracing diversity is a prerequisite for constructing a Europe in which all citizens enjoy equal status and equal rights, also as regards their languages.
- Promoting knowledge of European languages other than the mother tongue is one way of developing successful political, economic and personal contacts between people from different linguistic groups; it promotes intercultural understanding and helps to eradicate xenophobia, racism and intolerance. Speaking languages other than the mother tongue offers greater personal and professional opportunities and real access to the rights conferred by the European Union, in particular the right to live and work anywhere in the EU.
- Europe's Member States have emphasised the aim of improving and diversifying language learning. In particular, the Council has pointed out in recent resolutions, that school children as a general rule should have the opportunity of learning one or more languages other than their mother tongue, starting at an early age.

The view that economic and political integration require language learning no less than mutual tolerance and understanding recurs regularly in European Union documents, especially those concerned with education and training. Thus the fourth general objective of the 1995 *White Paper on Education and Training* is proficiency in three Community languages:

> In line with the resolution of the Council of Education Ministers of 31 March 1995, it is becoming necessary for everyone, irrespective of training and education routes chosen, to be able to acquire and keep up their ability to communicate in at least two Community languages in addition to their mother tongue.[31]

However, the member states of the European Union adopted this resolution only in a modified form:

> The Commission regrets the fact that the importance of this commitment was reduced, the Member States limiting its effect by using the words "if possible".[32]

Despite this setback, the Commission continues to pursue the goal of "mother tongue plus two" for what it sees as compelling economic reasons. Thus a recent Commission Staff Working Paper, *Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity – Consultation*, bases its argument for more, better and more diverse language teaching on the goal of making the European Union "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based culture in the world":

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[31] Commission of the European Communities, *White Paper on Education and Training: Teaching and Learning – Towards the Learning Society* (Brussels, 1995), p. 47.

[32] Ibid.

> One of the keys to the European Union's success as a knowledge-based economy is how well it tackles the issue of language learning. How well it deals with wider issues of language, culture and diversity over the coming decade will shape its cohesion and its role in the world.[33]

This challenge faces the whole of the Union, not just the western English-speaking fringe:

> […] Europeans' range of foreign languages is very limited: 41% speak English as a foreign language; 19% speak French, 10% speak German, 7% speak Spanish and 3% speak Italian. No other language achieves even 1%. This narrow range of foreign languages could make it difficult for European businesses to achieve their full potential in a multilingual marketplace.[34]

In meeting the challenge secondary education has a vital role to play:

> It is in secondary education or training that young people complete the essential core of language skills that will serve them throughout life. However, in some Member States, foreign language learning is not compulsory for certain groups of pupils, and others propose to make foreign language learning optional. It is difficult to see how this approach will meet the Union's objective that every citizen should speak two languages in addition to his mother tongue.[35]

The NCCA's 1994 proposal for a pilot initiative to strengthen the European dimension in the primary curriculum[36] is strongly aligned to these arguments and contributed to the establishment of the Primary Modern Languages Pilot Project by the Department of Education and Science in 1998. Nevertheless, Ireland is one of the EU member states where foreign language learning is not compulsory.

4.3 Issues for discussion

Consideration of the international status of English and European language policy gives rise to the following issues for discussion:

- *The European Commission's goal of "mother tongue plus two"*. What is our response to this goal, given that English is the mother tongue of the majority of the population and we have to take account of Irish as well as foreign languages? Is the goal a sufficient reason to make foreign language learning an obligatory component of the post-primary curriculum? However we respond to these questions, it would be easier to do so coherently within the framework of an integrated language curriculum.

- *Diversification*. European language policy strongly implies a need to teach more languages in all European countries. If we accept this, how should diversification be managed, and according to what principles? Also, how might a process of diversification be launched, given the likely difficulty, at least in the short term, of recruiting teachers of languages other than those already included in the post-primary curriculum?

- *Levels of attainment*. If we create a situation in which at least some post-primary students can learn more foreign languages than at present, what levels of proficiency should we expect them to achieve? Should we, for example, seek to create a situation in which students can learn either one foreign language to a specified level or two foreign languages to a lower specified level? Again, a positive answer to this question would be easier to elaborate within the framework of an integrated language curriculum.

The next section describes two tools recently developed by the Council of Europe which may help us to answer these and related questions in a clear and consistent way.

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[33] Commission of the European Communities, *Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity – Consultation* (Commission Staff Working Paper, Brussels, 2002), p. 5.

[34] Ibid., p. 6.

[35] Ibid., p. 8.

[36] National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *The European Dimension in the Primary School Curriculum. Proposal for a Pilot Initiative to include a Foreign Language Component* (Dublin, 1994).

5 The Common European Framework and the European Language Portfolio

5.1 Functions, notions, and the communicative approach

The idea of a "communicative approach" to language teaching began to encroach on the awareness of language teachers in the mid 1970s. By the end of the decade it was the dominant preoccupation of theorists and practitioners alike; and by the mid 1980s most curricula, textbooks and teachers throughout western Europe were happy to describe themselves as "communicative". The "communicative approach" did not arise from a single source and it was never a single uniform phenomenon; hence the need to use quotation marks. In some quarters its development was informed by early research into the processes of second language acquisition, which made plain the inevitability of error in the development of L2 proficiency and confirmed the central role that language use ("communication") plays in successful language learning.[37] The increasingly influential sphere of English language teaching, closely associated with the rapid growth of applied linguistics as an academic discipline in the 1970s, was especially receptive to these research findings. At the same time the Graded Objectives movement in the United Kingdom developed an approach to language learning and teaching that proceeded by a series of small steps defined not linguistically, in terms of grammar, but communicatively, in terms of language behaviour.[38] Perhaps the decisive factor in the rapid victory of the "communicative approach" however, was the Council of Europe's publication in 1975 of *The Threshold Level* by Jan van Ek.

The Threshold Level set out to specify the language that a learner needs in order to "cross the threshold" into the target language community and live there temporarily as an independent social agent. It did so by adopting a behavioural rather than a grammatical approach. Its principal definitional categories are the communicative functions that the learner needs to be able to realise (e.g. *introducing*, *leave-taking*, *persuading*, *apologising*), and the notions (or meanings) that are required in order to fulfil communicative functions. General notions are the context-independent meanings that underlie all linguistic communication, while specific notions (usually expressed as lexical items) refer to particular objects and phenomena (e.g. *holiday*, *travel agent*, *airport*, *customs officer*). *The Threshold Level* fuelled the "communicative revolution" in three ways. Firstly, at a broadly political level its publication marked an important shift in international beliefs about the purpose of foreign language learning and thus teaching. Secondly, the functional-notional inventory that lies at its heart was widely used to determine the content of language textbooks, especially those written for learners of English as a foreign language. This helped to shift the focus away from the study of grammatical form and towards the communication of meaning. Thirdly, the definitional innovations of *The Threshold Level* stimulated a process of language curriculum revision across Europe. Although few curricula adopted its detailed taxonomic approach, most began to focus explicitly on the communicative purpose of language learning and to adopt a general orientation that was more functional than grammatical. As noted in section 2.4 above, Ireland was no exception in this respect, though the current foreign languages syllabuses also emphasise the analytical dimension of language learning.

The Threshold Level was not without its critics, of course. Among applied linguists there were those who liked to point out that its functional categories lacked an empirical foundation, and others who argued that its taxonomies encouraged a "phrase book" approach to teaching and learning. The shift towards "communicative" textbook design led to a widespread neglect of

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[37] See, for example, the pioneering work of S. Pit Corder, a selection of which is gathered in *Error analysis and interlanguage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

[38] B. Page and D. Hewett, *Languages step by step: Graded Objectives in the UK* (London: Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research, 1987).

grammar, and this too was blamed on *The Threshold Level*. In this instance, however, the verdict must be "not guilty". Not only does the section on general notions contain a great deal of grammar, though admittedly in an unfamiliar form; *The Threshold Level* also contains an extensive "grammatical inventory" and a grammatical summary. Almost thirty years after its first publication it is easy to identify limitations in the approach adopted. For example, it envisages the development of relatively advanced reading, listening and speaking skills, but only minimal writing skills; whereas the cognitive interdependence of language skills makes it difficult to imagine the effective development of *Threshold Level* speaking skills without a much fuller development of writing skills, especially in view of the central role that writing plays in processes of formal learning. By the same token it is by no means clear how the lists of functions and notions are to be translated into an effective programme of teaching and learning. What is more, from today's perspective the social roles envisaged for the language learner—temporary visitor to or resident in the target language community and occasional interactant with native and non-native speakers of the language encountered elsewhere—seem too narrow, reflecting as they do the relatively limited mobility of individuals and populations in the 1970s. Against these reservations, however, it should be noted that the more expansive French and German equivalents of *The Threshold Level*, published respectively in 1976 and 1980,[39] already sought to respond to some of the criticisms to which the model was vulnerable. It should also be noted that the model has continued to develop and in the last decade has been an essential language planning tool in some of the new democracies of central and eastern Europe.

5.2 The Common European Framework

The descriptive model that began with *The Threshold Level* has developed in two ways. Firstly, two further levels have been defined, Vantage and Waystage, respectively higher and lower than Threshold, and work is proceeding on the definition of Breakthrough, which is a level below Waystage. Secondly, the model has become increasingly sensitive to the social complexity of linguistic communication. These two strands of development are also reflected in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment*,[40] which (i) offers a comprehensive analysis of linguistic communication and the skills that the learner must acquire, and (ii) defines communicative proficiency at six levels (A1 BREAKTHROUGH, A2 WAYSTAGE, B1 THRESHOLD, B2 VANTAGE, C1 EFFECTIVE OPERATIONAL PROFICIENCY, C2 MASTERY) in relation to five skills (LISTENING, READING, SPOKEN INTERACTION, SPOKEN PRODUCTION, WRITING).

The decision to develop the Common European Framework (CEF) was taken in the early 1990s. Experts from a large number of Council of Europe member states were involved in the initial processes of consultation and the writing of preparatory studies. Two drafts were extensively circulated for analysis and feedback in 1996 and 1997, and a revised version of the framework was commercially published in "canonical" English and French versions in 2001. The CEF has already been translated into sixteen languages, and further translations are in preparation. In other words, since the publication of the first draft in 1996, it has had the same kind of impact on the language teaching world as *The Threshold Level* almost thirty years ago.

The CEF's taxonomic approach to the description of linguistic communication and the skills that the learner must acquire is not immune to criticism; though it is only fair to point out that it is more comprehensive than anything previously attempted and thus provides an unparalleled basis for international discussion and further work. However, it is the so-called Common Reference Levels that make the CEF irresistible, because they answer three urgent needs.

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[39] D. Coste, J. Courtillon, V. Ferenczi, M. Martins-Baltar and E. Papo, *Un niveau seuil* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1976); M. Baldegger, M. Müller, G. Schneider and A. Näf, *Kontaktschwelle* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1980).

[40] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Firstly, they provide an internationally accepted scale that can be used to compare different language examinations and different systems of certification. In this they provide a solution to a problem with which the Council of Europe has been grappling for almost four decades. Secondly, they facilitate the planning and implementation of integrated language curricula, which may need to allow for different languages to be learnt to different levels.[41] Thirdly, because the Common Reference Levels are defined in terms of short descriptions ("descriptors") of communicative behaviour, they can be used at once to specify learning targets, select teaching and learning activities, and determine the criteria by which learning achievement is measured. The importance of this innovation cannot be exaggerated. For the first time we have a set of tools that can be used simultaneously by (i) curriculum developers, course designers and textbook authors, (ii) teachers and learners, and (iii) examination boards and other language test providers. In other words, the Common Reference Levels offer a means of integrating curriculum, teaching and assessment as never before.[42]

The CEF defines the Common Reference Levels with increasing degrees of specificity. First there is the so-called global scale (Appendix 1), which provides a general definition of each level. For example, A1 is defined thus:

> Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

Then the Common Reference Levels are defined in terms of the five skills listed above (Appendix 2). Thus A1 LISTENING is defined as:

> I can recognise familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family and immediate concrete surroundings when people speak slowly and clearly.

And after this each of the skills is subdivided into a series of illustrative scales. For example, overall listening comprehension is divided into *Understanding conversation between native speakers*, *Listening as a member of a live audience*, *Listening to announcements and instructions*, and *Listening to audio media and recordings*. The A1 descriptor for *Listening to announcements and instructions* is:

> Can understand instructions addressed carefully and slowly to him/her and follow short, simple directions.

The Common Reference Levels were defined on the basis of an extensive research project in which descriptors were judged according to their precision and usability by a large number of experienced language teachers.[43] They thus enjoy a high degree of empirical validity. At the same time, they clearly imply a learning trajectory that reflects the structure of western European educational systems and typical patterns of adult foreign language learning and use. Al-

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[41] cf. the brief discussion of an integrated language curriculum on pp.6 and 14 above.

[42] Integrate Ireland Language and Training has exploited this feature in its programme of support for teachers of English as a second language in primary and post-primary schools. It has developed English language proficiency benchmarks by interpreting the first three Common Reference Levels in terms of the communicative skills that newcomer pupils and students need in order to access the primary and post-primary curricula; and it has then used the benchmarks to elaborate (i) the goal-setting and self-assessment checklists that are central to its versions of the European Language Portfolio for newcomer pupils and students, and (ii) a variety of tools for tracking and assessing their progress. See also Appendix 4.

[43] B. North, *The development of a Common Framework scale of language proficiency* (New York: Lang, 2000); G. Schneider and B. North, *Fremdsprachen können – was heisst das? Skalen zur Beschreibung, Beurteilung und Selbsteinschätzung der fremdsprachlichen Kommunikationsfähigkeit* (Chur/Zurich: Rüegger, 2000).

though from certain points of view this may seem something of a limitation, as far as post-primary language learning is concerned it is a positive strength.

European educational systems will ignore the Common Reference Levels at their peril. The levels have already been adopted by the Association of Language Testers in Europe, several of the internationally active providers of language tests (for example, Cambridge ESOL and the Goethe-Institut), and the ministries of education in a number of Council of Europe member states. In other words, they are set to play an increasingly important role in the measurement of second/foreign language proficiency and in the comparison of different systems of certification.

5.3 The European Language Portfolio

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) was conceived by the Council of Europe as a companion piece to the CEF. It has three obligatory components, a language passport, a language biography, and a dossier:

- The *language passport* is used to build up a cumulative record of the owner's language learning and intercultural experience. At its centre is the owner's own assessment of his/her achieved proficiency in second/foreign languages, undertaken on the basis of the so-called self-assessment grid (Appendix 2).
- The *language biography* provides a reflective accompaniment to the ongoing process of learning and using second/foreign languages, and engaging with the cultures associated with them. It supports the setting of learning targets and the process of self-assessment by expanding the descriptions of proficiency in the self-assessment grid into checklists of communicative tasks.
- The *dossier* is the least defined part of the ELP—in many models it consists of no more than an empty table of contents for the owner to fill in. Its purpose is to provide a space in which ELP owners can show what they can do in the various languages they know and illustrate their intercultural experience, usually in written text but sometimes also in audio and/or video recordings. In some implementations the dossier is also a place where ELP owners keep materials relevant to their current learning; for example, vocabulary or grammatical rules they know they need to master, plans and drafts of projects they are working on, and newspaper or magazine articles that are relevant to their learning goals.

These obligatory characteristics of the ELP are laid down in a set of *Principles and Guidelines*[44] which explain that the ELP is designed to promote the development of plurilingualism and that it "values the full range of the learner's language and intercultural competence and experience regardless of whether acquired within or outside formal education". The *Principles and Guidelines* also define two complementary functions of the ELP. On the one hand it has a pedagogical function, to the extent that it guides and supports the learning process, emphasising in particular the development of learner autonomy; on the other hand it has a reporting function in that it allows the owner to record and illustrate proficiency in languages other than the mother tongue. These two functions reflect two long-standing concerns of the Council of Europe: the promotion of learner autonomy as a prerequisite for effective lifelong learning, and the need to find ways of translating very different national schemes of grading and certification into an internationally transparent format.

The ELP was first introduced as a set of proposals for development in 1997.[45] From 1998 to 2000, projects conducted in 15 member states and by three international non-governmental organisations designed and piloted versions of the ELP that between them covered all educa-

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[44] Council for Cultural Cooperation, *European Language Portfolio (ELP): principles and guidelines.* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2000; <culture.coe.int/ portfolio>).

[45] Council for Cultural Cooperation, *European Language Portfolio: proposals for development*, with contributions by I. Christ, F. Debyser, A. Dobson, R. Schärer, G. Schneider/B. North and J. Trim, (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1997).

tional sectors, from primary, through lower and upper secondary, to vocational, university and adult. The pilot projects were extensive enough to demonstrate that the ELP is capable of supporting the development of learner autonomy, but far too short to allow conclusions to be drawn about either its reporting function or its impact on the promotion and development of plurilingualism.[46] In 2000 the Council of Europe established a European Validation Committee to validate and accredit ELP models. To date (March 2003) 39 ELPs have been validated, though three of these await final accreditation.[47]

In promoting the design, piloting and implementation of ELPs the Council of Europe wished to allow as much freedom as possible to ELP developers. At the same time, however, it recognised the importance of insisting on the ELP's European identity. This explains the development in 2000 of the so-called "standard adult passport",[48] which is recommended for all ELPs aimed at language learners of 15 years and over. It also explains work in progress to develop "standard" passports for learners in the primary and lower secondary sectors.

In post-primary education the ELP seeks to fulfil two functions. Firstly, as noted above, it can help language learners to become more autonomous by developing their ability to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning.[49] Secondly, it can be treated as a special case of the more general phenomenon of portfolio learning and drawn into the formal assessment of learner achievement. The Council of Europe insists that the ELP is the property of the individual learner, and (as we have seen) self-assessment plays a central role in its use; but this is not to say that it could not also be used for purposes of external assessment, especially in cases where examinations are designed according to the Common Reference Levels of the CEF.[50]

5.4 Further developments

Although *The Threshold Level* exerted a powerful influence on the development of the "communicative approach" over many years, efforts were afoot to strengthen the model almost before it was published. Reference has already been made to the much more extensive specifications for French and German, published in 1976 and 1980 respectively; and *The Threshold Level* itself has been revised and expanded twice, in 1990 and 1999. The same will also happen with the CEF and the ELP. As the Common Reference Levels come to be more widely applied to the assessment of L2 proficiency, it is inevitable that they will be refined and differentiated to take account of the particular needs of different age groups and different learning objectives. The CEF's account of linguistic communication and the skills that learners need to acquire is also likely to undergo further elaboration, especially in relation to the intercultural dimension of L2 learning and use. In the same way, the ELP is set to develop further on the basis of the pilot projects that began in 1998. For example, besides commissioning the design of "standard" passports for optional use in ELPs designed for primary and lower secondary learners, the Council of Europe plans to establish a database of goal-setting and self-

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46 For a full account of the pilot phase, see R. Schärer, *European Language Portfolio: final report on the pilot project* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2000; <culture.coe.int>); for a summary of ELP developments to the end of 2001, see D. Little, "The European Language Portfolio: structure, origins, implementation and challenges" (*Language Teaching* 35.3, pp. 182–9).

47 Appendix 3 provides a complete list of validated ELPs; Appendix 4 gives details of the validated ELPs developed in Ireland.

48 C. Flügel, "Der standardisierte paneuropäische Sprachenpass für Erwachsene" (*Babylonia* 4/00, 2000, pp. 7–8).

49 For evidence gathered in Irish post-primary classrooms, see E. Ushioda and J. Ridley, "Working with the European Language Portfolio in Irish post-primary schools: report on an evaluation project", CLCS Occasional Paper No.61 (Dublin: Trinity College, Centre for Language and Communication Studies, 2002).

50 This line of argument is developed more fully by D. Little, "Learner autonomy and public examinations", in D. Little, J. Ridley and E. Ushioda (eds), *Learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom: learner, teacher, curriculum and assessment* (Dublin: Authentik, forthcoming).

assessment checklists that will be freely available to all ELP developers. It is possible, moreover, that at some stage in the future the ELP will be expanded to include the owner's first language. After all, one of its declared purposes is to promote the development of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism; yet in its present form it largely neglects the mother tongue and native culture, which between them provide the soil in which proficiency in other languages and cultures inevitably grows.

Finally, it is necessary to mention two new initiatives designed to help member states review and, where appropriate, revise their language education policies. Firstly, towards the end of 2002 the Council of Europe published for discussion and consultation a *Guide for the development of language education policies in Europe* by Jean-Claude Beacco and Michael Byram.[51] The purpose of this guide is to help educational authorities to move from an acknowledgement of the value of linguistic diversity to genuinely plurilingual education. Among other things, it provides an expanded and updated version of the arguments for an integrated language curriculum that were central to the *Report of the Board of Studies for Languages* (CEB 1987). Secondly, building on the dynamic and partnerships created at national level during the European Year of Languages (2001), the Council of Europe invites member states to participate in a process of dialogue and discussion on the development of their language education policies with the assistance of a team of visiting policy experts. Analysis of available data, expert visits, and in-depth discussions with relevant parties provide the basis for a "country profile"—a forward-looking report that focuses on policy perspectives.[52]

5.5 Issues for discussion

The work of the Council of Europe reviewed in this section suggests the following issues for discussion:

- *Defining appropriate progression in post-primary language learning*. Section 2.4 noted that the present syllabuses for foreign languages fail to define clearly the progression from junior to senior cycle. The Common Reference Levels of the CEF offer a means of remedying this deficiency. The first step (already taken)[53] is to assign the communicative goals stated or implied in the current curricula to the Common Reference Levels; a second step would be to ask whether the resulting inventory can easily be translated into a coherent programme of teaching and learning; and a third step would be to revise the curricula on the basis of the Common Reference Levels.
- *Measuring the communicative success of current curricula for Irish and foreign languages*. As noted above, the only way of establishing how successfully the current curricula support the development of students' communicative proficiency is to design batteries of independent language tests and have them taken by students who have just completed the Junior and Leaving Certificate curricula. The Common Reference Levels provide an internationally accepted basis for the development of such tests.
- *Developing a strategy for diversification*. The recent introduction of Russian, Arabic and Japanese indicates a readiness to diversify the provision of languages at post-primary level, but we lack a principled basis on which to pursue further diversification. Within the framework provided by a national language policy, the Common Reference Levels could be used not only to specify the degree of proficiency to be achieved but also to

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[51] This document is downloadable in two versions from the Language Policy Division's section of the Council of Europe website (<www.coe.int>).

[52] In March 2003 three "country profiles" were in progress (Hungary, Norway, Slovenia), and two more were in preparation (Cyprus, Romania).

[53] In the ELP developed for use in Irish post-primary schools, where the goal-setting and self-assessment checklists restate the communicative goals of the current curricula in terms of the Common Reference Levels; see also Appendix 4 below.

identify partial competences that would focus on some skills to the exclusion of others.[54] They could thus assist in the development of an integrated language curriculum in which languages might be learned in different combinations, for different purposes, and to different levels of proficiency.

- *The European Language Portfolio and learner autonomy*. The current curricula for foreign languages mention learner autonomy as a key goal, but in terms that fail to do justice to the complexity of the concept. Anecdotal evidence suggests that very few language classrooms are organised with a view to developing learner autonomy. The ELP has shown itself to be an effective means of helping language learners to become more autonomous, in Ireland as in other countries. Consideration should be given to exploring more fully the usefulness of the ELP in helping to develop this dimension of post-primary language learning.
- *Developing new approaches to assessment*. Section 2.4 drew attention to the lack of a test of oral proficiency in the Junior Certificate and the lack of interaction between the oral and written examinations in the Leaving Certificate. One way forward might be to include a portfolio element in student assessment and to make students' portfolios the basis of their oral examination. The ELP is well suited to this role since its self-assessment dimension is closely tied to the Common Reference Levels. Accordingly, consideration should be given to establishing a pilot project in the assessment of language proficiency at Junior and Leaving Certificate levels that assigns a central role to portfolio assessment and the ELP.
- *Council of Europe "country profile"*. Consideration should be given to inviting the Council of Europe to nominate a team of international experts to review language education policy in Ireland and develop a "country profile" for use in future planning.

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[54] See Appendix 2.

6 Trends in language teaching

6.1 The "communicative revolution"

The "communicative revolution" in language teaching was a response to two quite distinct problems. On the one hand it was necessary to find a way of defining language learning goals that corresponded to the communication needs of migrant populations. Hence the behavioural approach adopted in *The Threshold Level* and the use of functions and notions to define the target communicative repertoire. On the other hand there was growing frustration at the failure of traditional teaching approaches to develop learners' communicative proficiency in the target language.

For most of the twentieth century the grammar-translation method had dominated language classrooms. Its central concern was to teach grammatical features and rules together with sufficient vocabulary to practise them. A typical grammar-translation textbook was divided into chapters that focussed on different grammatical points or areas. A short text in the target language would often illustrate the grammar in question, which was then practised by translating sentences and longer texts into the target language and from the target language into the mother tongue. The primary medium of communication in the classroom was the learners' mother tongue, and there was little room for spontaneous use of the target language. Closely modelled on the teaching of classical languages, the grammar-translation method certainly taught a great deal of grammar, and learners lucky enough to spend time living among native speakers of the target language often found that they had brought with them a useful toolkit with which to manage the business of developing their capacity for spontaneous communication. But the grammar-translation method did little for the great majority of learners, for whom living in the target language community was not an option.

Only a decade or so before the first outriders of the "communicative revolution" appeared, the audio-lingual and audio-visual methods were widely promoted and adopted. Loosely based on the behaviourist psychology of B. F. Skinner,[55] they proposed that learning languages was no different from learning anything else: it was a matter of forming the right habits. Grammar was replaced by "structures"—essentially sentence patterns—and the learner's task was to practise basic "structures" and their variants until mastery was achieved. In keeping with one of the major tenets of behaviourist psychology, the audio-lingual and audio-visual methods banned the explicit treatment of grammar and attached no importance to knowledge about the target language or reflection on (for example) its grammatical patterns. The promotion of these methods was closely allied to the invention of the language laboratory, which provided a means of individualising drill and practice. But in most schools, in Ireland as elsewhere, it proved impossible to achieve the levels of intensity that behaviourist drilling demanded as a matter of principle. Where schools had language laboratories, they were typically used for just one lesson a week; and often they fell into disuse because teachers and learners rebelled against the monotony of four-phase structure drills. In any case the majority of teachers supplemented the sentence patterns and model dialogues of their audio-lingual/audio-visual textbooks with grammatical explanations.

The weakness of the grammar-translation method was its assumption that language could be taught as content, whereas communicative proficiency is a procedural skill and so must be taught (at least partly) as process. The audio-lingual and audio-visual methods acknowledged this, but assumed that human beings are essentially robots and that conscious awareness and reflection are irrelevant to learning. Communicative theory recognised that language learning involves process as well as content, but it also recognised that explicit knowledge about language, including grammar, is essential to the development of communicative efficiency. However, communicative theory was more than a combination of the best elements of the

[55] B. F. Skinner, *Verbal Behavior* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957).

grammar-translation and audio-lingual/audio-visual methods. One of its key principles was that meaning should always have priority over form. This had two consequences: (i) that the primary goal, but also the preferred channel of learning, should be the communication and (especially) the negotiation of meaning; and (ii) that the explicit treatment of target language grammar should always be firmly embedded in a communicative context.[56] Under the impact of research into second language acquisition, communicative theory also emphasised the importance of providing learners with a rich diet of authentic texts from which they could derive the input required for acquisition.[57] These principles remain as valid now as they were in the 1980s.

But inevitably the theory, and much of the pedagogical innovation it implied, tended to reach classrooms in an attenuated form. Many communicative textbooks, especially in the early years, bore a close resemblance to their audio-lingual/audio-visual predecessors, which meant that they emphasised the practice of scripted dialogues ("functions") and paid little attention to the teaching of grammar (phonology as well as morphology and syntax). Precisely because they were textbooks, they encouraged the assumption that communication can be taught as content, by learning exponents of functions (recall that one of the criticisms of *The Threshold Level* was that it encouraged a "phrase book" approach to language learning). This attenuation has led to the widespread view that the communicative approach attempts to teach language by getting learners to practise pre-scripted scenarios and ignoring grammar. Two things confirm that there is more than a little truth in this view: the form of the Leaving Certificate oral examination in foreign languages, and the fact that whatever fluency school-leavers possess is all too often impenetrable to a native speaker of the language in question.[58]

6.2 The central role of target language use

According to communicative theory as it was elaborated twenty years ago, target language use plays an indispensable role in successful language learning. Bearing in mind that the development of communicative proficiency depends on process as well as content, this means a great deal more than regularly rehearsing scripted dialogues. There are many ways in which learning a second or foreign language as part of one's education differs from first language acquisition or learning a second language "naturalistically", by living in an environment where it is in daily use. However, in one fundamental respect all language learning is the same: the ability to communicate spontaneously grows out of a sustained effort to communicate. In other words, the only way of learning to speak a language is to speak it, the only way of learning to write a language is to write it, and so on. This is, of course, easy to say but much less easy to do; which explains why so much of the research on language teaching in the past ten years or so has attempted to identify the elements of an appropriate pedagogical practice rooted in language use.

Three closely related concepts are particularly worth mentioning here. The first is task-based learning (TBL), which seeks to stimulate target language use by engaging learners in the performance of tasks that have some non-linguistic goal; its effectiveness is confirmed by empirical research.[59] The second concept is "focus on form" (FonF), which attempts to formalise

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[56] See, for example, S. J. Savignon, *Communicative competence: an experiment in foreign language teaching* (Philadelphia: Center for Curriculum Development, 1972).

[57] D. Little, S. Devitt and D. Singleton, *Learning foreign languages from authentic texts: theory and practice* (Dublin: Authentik, 1989).

[58] In 1993–4 Trinity College Dublin introduced extracurricular modules in French and German for students not taking a language for their degree. Each year since, the external examiners for these modules have commented adversely on students' pronunciation and intonation. One external examiner for German judged that students taking a beginners' course in German were significantly easier to understand than students who had a school-leaving qualification in the language.

[59] An up-to-date overview of research is provided by P. Skehan, "Task-based instruction" (*Language Teaching* 36.1 (2003), pp. 1–14). See also P. Skehan, *A cognitive approach to language learning*

the communicative principles (i) that the development of proficiency is supported by paying explicit attention to grammatical form and (ii) that FonF should always be embedded in a communicative context. Like TBL, FonF is supported by empirical research findings.[60] The third concept is "comprehensible output", which stands for the argument that in order to develop communicative proficiency language learners need more than exposure to the target language (Stephen Krashen's notion of "comprehensible input",[61] was strongly influential in the 1980s): target language production is also essential.[62]

6.3 Learner autonomy and motivation

Another essential characteristic of communicative theory is its learner-centredness. This is reflected above all in the argument that to be effective, language teaching must take account of learners' needs and interests. Of course, curricula can be learner-centred only at the level of general principle, by paying attention to common characteristics, needs and likely interests of the learner population in question and perhaps encouraging certain kinds of pedagogical behaviour. The achievement of learner-centredness in practice is always a matter of what individual teachers do in particular classrooms. The truly successful pursuit of learner-centredness produces learner autonomy.

Learner autonomy is one of the mostly widely touted terms in recent discussion of language teaching; it is also widely misunderstood. For example, in some quarters it is taken to be a synonym for self-instruction; while in others it is believed to be something that learners should develop more or less spontaneously as they mature. According to the specialist literature, however, learner autonomy is a matter of gradually developing a capacity for reflective self-management in relation to the content and process of one's learning.[63] Understood in this way, it is equally important at all levels of education and in all disciplines. Autonomous learners are those who understand what they are learning and why, who share in the planning of learning activities, and who regularly review the progress of their learning and evaluate its outcomes. As we have seen, target language use plays an essential role in the development of communicative proficiency. Accordingly, the gradual development of autonomy in language learning supports, but is also supported by, the gradual development of autonomy in language use.

Although the term learner autonomy implies a concern with the individual learner, its pedagogical implementation is emphatically not a matter of learners working on their own independently of the teacher. On the contrary, autonomy theory draws on developmental and experiential learning research to insist that learner autonomy is the product of interactive, collaborative processes that depend on the teacher's expertise for their shape and direction. Essentially, the pursuit of autonomy in language learning is guided by three interdependent principles. The principle of learner involvement requires that learners, as individuals and as a

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(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) and M. Byrgate, P. Skehan and M. Swain (eds), *Researching Pedagogic Tasks* (Harlow: Longman, 2001).

60 See, for example, the papers collected in C. Doughty and J. Williams (eds), *Focus on form in classroom second language acquisition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

61 S. D. Krashen, *Second language acquisition and second language learning* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1981) and *Principles and practice in second language acquisition* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1982).

62 The concept of "comprehensible output" is particularly associated with Merrill Swain; see, for example, her articles "Three functions of output in second language learning" (in G. Cook and B. Seidlhofer (eds), *Principle and practice in applied linguistics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) and "The output hypothesis and beyond: mediating acquisition through collaborative dialogue" (in J. P. Lantolf (ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

63 See, for example, D. Little, *Learner autonomy 1: definitions, issues, problems* (Dublin: Authentik, 1991) and L. Dam, *Learner autonomy 3: from theory to classroom practice* (Dublin: Authentik, 1995).

class, are involved in the planning, management and evaluation of learning activities, based on a negotiated understanding of the requirements of their curriculum. The principle of learner reflection requires that at every stage learners are stimulated to reflect on what they are doing, why, how, and with what degree of success. The principle of appropriate target language use requires that all classroom activities are carried out in the target language, and that the activities themselves demand *spontaneous* target language use. Autonomy theory does not assume that learners can become autonomous without assistance or support; on the contrary, it argues that learner autonomy develops only gradually and that the teacher has a key role to play at every stage.[64]

This view of learner autonomy coincides with an important shift in our understanding of learner motivation. For two decades the discussion of motivation in language learning was dominated by the distinction between "integrative" and "instrumental" motivation.[65] On the basis of this distinction, for which there was empirical support, it was argued that learners were motivated to learn a language either because they wished to identify with native speakers of the language ("integrative motivation") or because the ability to use the language would bring them some material benefit ("instrumental motivation"). However, when applied to language learning at school the distinction was not specially helpful. If post-primary students are asked why it is a good idea to learn foreign languages, their responses are likely to be partly "integrative" and partly "instrumental". In any case, this distinction says nothing about the sources of motivation. More recent discussion has centred on the concept of "intrinsic motivation", that is, the motivation that comes from inside the learner. Our intrinsic motivation is awakened and sustained, so the argument runs, when we are engaged in activities that support our autonomy, making us feel that our behaviour is free and volitional rather than controlled by others. Thus, whatever the individual learner's orientation, his or her motivation to learn will depend on the extent to which he or she feels in control of the learning situation and process. According to this line of argument, autonomous learners are by definition motivated learners; conversely, the pursuit of learner autonomy is the teacher's best way of responding to unmotivated learners.[66]

Since the first pilot projects were launched in 1998 the European Language Portfolio has proved to be a useful tool in the development of learner autonomy.[67] It is easy to see why this should be so. The checklists of communicative tasks that are central to the language biography facilitate planning and self-assessment; in their different ways the language passport, the language biography and the dossier all encourage regular reflection on the content and process of learning; and the dossier allows the owner to accumulate evidence of learning achievement. What is more, the ELP provides its owner with two complementary perspectives on his or her language learning. One is from the inside; the ELP is integral to the learning process. The other is from the outside; the ELP is the cumulative "deposit" of learning, from which the learner can stand back. It seems probable that the dynamic interaction of these two perspectives explains much of the pedagogical success achieved by the ELP.

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[64] For an elaboration of this theoretical position and a report on a four-year exploratory project, see D. Little, J. Ridley and E. Ushioda, *Towards greater learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom* (Dublin: Authentik, 2002).

[65] R. Gardner and W. Lambert, *Attitudes and motivation in second-language learning* (Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1972).

[66] For an accessible overview of relevant research in social psychology, see E. Deci with R. Flaste, *Why we do what we do* (New York: Penguin, 1996). The implications of this research for second and foreign language learning have been explored by E. Ushioda, *Learner autonomy 5: the role of motivation* (Dublin: Authentik, 1996).

[67] Again see R. Schärer, *European Language Portfolio: final report on the pilot project* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2000; (<culture.coe.int>) and E. Ushioda and J. Ridley, "Working with the European Language Portfolio in Irish post-primary schools: report on an evaluation project", CLCS Occasional Paper No.61 (Dublin: Trinity College, Centre for Language and Communication Studies, 2002).

6.4 Immersion programmes

Within the communicative paradigm, the definition of curriculum content raises two separate but related questions. What repertoire of communicative behaviour do we expect learners to achieve? What kinds of target language material must they engage with? As we have seen, our present foreign language curricula define behavioural repertoires in terms of themes and activities. They also encourage the study of literary and other texts in the target language, though, because such study is not examined, it is largely neglected. As a consequence, much language teaching circles narrowly around the various tasks that are set in the public exams, not all of which are, strictly speaking, communicative.

This problem of content is by no means unique to Ireland. A radical solution that has recently gained ground in other European countries is to teach part of the curriculum through a foreign language. In this way, history or geography or science, together with the discursive practices involved in its study, provides the content of language learning. We have Irish-medium schools, of course, but our system has remained almost entirely untouched by the upsurge of international interest in CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning).[68] As a result we have been largely excluded from a growing European movement that offers a number of benefits calculated to support the implementation of European policy in language education, especially teacher and student exchange of various kinds.

CLIL is methodologically neutral. The fact that part of the curriculum is delivered through a second or foreign language says nothing about how it is taught, and some CLIL projects have adopted very traditional pedagogical techniques. At the same time, however, CLIL undoubtedly provides a framework within which learner autonomy can flourish. If Ireland cannot afford to ignore the Common Reference Levels of the CEF and the increasingly widespread adoption of the ELP, the same is true of the rapid growth of CLIL projects and the learning materials that some of them produce. It is no doubt unrealistic to imagine that all schools could offer a CLIL option to their students, but many could, in transition year and/or in senior cycle. The development of CLIL options, some of which might be in Irish, would create an important point of contact with Irish-medium schools, which might be described as taking CLIL to its logical conclusion.

6.5 Media and information technologies

Media and information technologies can support language learning in three ways.[69] Firstly, language laboratories and computers facilitate individual practice and feedback, and computers offer various means of analysing target language texts. Although drill and practice and linguistic analysis are by no means the whole of language learning, they play an indispensable role in helping learners towards mastery of the forms (sounds as well as structures) of their target language. Secondly, radio, television, and audio/video playback (whether analogue or digital) give learners access to an important part of the linguistically mediated culture of the target language community. The rich diet of target language texts required by communicative theory should certainly not be limited to print. Thirdly, the Internet makes available a wealth of target language material in various media and opens new channels of communication, both synchronous (chat rooms, MOOs)[70] and asynchronous (e-mail, discussion lists). Tandem language learning, an arrangement whereby (for example) a native speaker of German learning

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[68] See D. Marsh, A. Maljers and A. K. Hartiala, *Profiling European CLIL classrooms* (University of Jyväskylä and European Platform for Dutch Education, 2001) and G. Langé (ed.), *TIE-CLIL professional development course* (Milan: MIUR, 2002).

[69] For a recent overview see D. Little, *Media, technologies and foreign language learning* (Dublin: Authentik, 1998).

[70] MOO stands for "Multiple-user domain Object-Oriented". See, for example, K. Schwienhorst, "Virtual environments and synchronous communication: collaborative language learning in object-oriented multiple-user domains (MOOs)" (in D. Little and B. Voss (eds.), *Language Centres: planning for the new millennium*, (Plymouth: CERCLES, 1997).

French and a native speaker of French learning German form a learning partnership to support each other's learning, was previously a matter of face-to-face meetings. But with the arrival of e-mail and MOOs it can now be carried on at distance,[71] with the added benefit that all communication between tandem partners is automatically recorded and thus provides material for further learning. So much linguistic communication within societies is now conducted via media and information technologies that language learning is bound to lose much of its interest and authenticity if it never or only rarely makes use of these technologies.

6.6 Issues for discussion

The arguments developed in this section give rise to the following issues for discussion:

- *Current post-primary language teaching practices.* Anecdotal evidence suggests that a survey of post-primary language classrooms (Irish as well as foreign languages) would reveal that (i) a great deal of English is spoken, (ii) there is little spontaneous target language use, (iii) little attention is paid to the explicit development of learner autonomy, and (iv) only very occasional recourse is made to media and information technologies. Consideration should be given to commissioning a survey of teachers and students to arrive at a fuller understanding of what goes on in post-primary language classrooms.
- *Two key issues for teacher education.* In order to teach effectively (i) through the target language and (ii) using media and information technologies, teachers require knowledge and skills that seem not to be central concerns in programmes of pre-service teacher education. This is a matter that requires urgent exploration as well as carefully co-ordinated in-service action.
- *Learner autonomy.* The current curricula for foreign languages mention learner autonomy as an educational goal but they do not define the concept and they say nothing about the pedagogical approaches likely to lead to its development. There has recently been a privately funded four-year project to help post-primary teachers to explore the concept of learner autonomy and its practical implementation in the classroom (the same project produced the Irish ELP for post-primary language learners).[72] More projects of this kind are needed, perhaps based on the ELP. In particular, the possibility of establishing whole-school projects and local school networks, perhaps with links to school networks in other countries, should be explored.
- *Content and language integrated learning.* CLIL programmes offer a means of forging methodological links between Irish-medium education and the teaching of foreign languages both here and in other European countries. At the same time, they raise serious questions about the structure of the curriculum and the nature of language assessment. Consideration should be given to establishing a CLIL pilot project involving a small number of volunteer schools, linked from the beginning to CLIL projects elsewhere.
- *Media and information technologies*. In many schools language teachers do not enjoy easy access to media and information technologies. Consideration should be given to establishing a languages project in (say) six schools that is based on the total availability of a computer network with Internet access. The teachers involved in the project would work together to deliver the post-primary language curriculum in such a way as to promote the development of learner autonomy while making maximum use of the available technology.

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[71] D. Little and H. Brammerts (eds), "A guide to language learning in tandem via the Internet", CLCS Occasional Paper No.46 (Dublin: Trinity College, Centre for Language and Communication Studies, 1996).

[72] D. Little, J. Ridley and E. Ushioda, *Towards greater learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom* (Dublin: Authentik, 2002).

7 Conclusion

This discussion paper began by briefly reviewing current post-primary provision for languages in the light of the recommendations contained in the *Report of the Board of Studies for Languages* published in 1987. It then considered the implications of four external factors for the future of that provision: Ireland's changing language profile; Ireland's position as an English-speaking member of the international community; the Council of Europe's introduction of the Common European Framework and the European Language Portfolio; and current trends in language learning and teaching. The points for discussion at the end of each section can be divided into three categories: criticisms of current curricula, questions about current provision, and challenges that must be met if our post-primary curriculum is to bear comparison with the best curricula elsewhere. In this concluding section criticisms, questions and challenges are summarised in turn.

7.1 Criticisms

The present curricula are vulnerable to four serious criticisms:

- *Language policy.* In the absence of a language policy that includes English and Irish as well as foreign languages, any attempt to make changes to the present system is bound to be piecemeal and provisional. We need a language policy that defines the position in the curriculum of English as the mother tongue of the majority of the population, of Irish as (i) the mother tongue of a minority of the population and (ii) a second language for the majority, of other mother tongues (Irish Sign Language, but also the languages brought to this country by newcomers), and of foreign languages. Such a policy must be historically and culturally sensitive and should embody an explicit response to the European policies of plurilingualism and diversification (to which Ireland is a party). In terms of our membership of the European Union and the Council of Europe, a language policy should arguably require all students to take Irish and at least one foreign language throughout their post-primary education; it should also explicitly encourage diversification of foreign language provision, based on an extensive analysis of the country's present and future language needs.

- *An integrated language curriculum.* On the basis of a coherent policy for languages it should be possible to construct an integrated language curriculum that would occupy an agreed amount of "curriculum space". At present there are no points of explicit contact between (i) English, (ii) Irish, and (iii) foreign languages. As a result, the curriculum overall cannot possibly deliver a coherent yet differentiated experience of language learning, language study and language use. Already in 1987 a major stumbling block to the construction of an integrated language curriculum was the absence of any sustained linguistic analysis in the teaching of English. This has been reinforced in the recent revision of the English curricula. One possible way forward, recommended in 1987, might be the development of an optional "language awareness" or "language study" strand in the English curriculum. Such a strand should take account of Irish Sign Language and Irish Traveller Cant.

- *Irish.* The failure to make separate curriculum provision for the teaching of Irish as (i) mother tongue/medium of schooling and (ii) second language is linguistically and educationally indefensible. The presence of a historically and culturally significant second language should be a source of curriculum strength and enrichment. Perhaps it still could be, given the necessary will and energy. Making appropriate provision for Irish, however, is not a matter for the post-primary curriculum alone: it is necessary to consider how the language should be taught from the beginning to the end of schooling, and particular attention needs to be paid to the transitions from primary to post-primary and from junior to senior cycle. In this connection it should be noted that the new Primary

School Curriculum, introduced in 1999, encourages new approaches to the teaching and learning of Irish, though it remains to be seen what impact this will have on Irish at post-primary level.

- *Diversification.* Because we have no language education policy, we have no criteria by which to decide which new languages should be added to the curriculum; and because we do not have an integrated language curriculum, diversification can only ever be undertaken at a cost to the established languages. If we are serious about diversification, we need to find a way of accommodating additional languages without thereby "squeezing" the languages we already have. Perhaps the only way of achieving this is to allow the "curriculum space" at present occupied by one foreign language to be divided up among two or even three languages. This would require an imaginative act of curriculum development and an even more imaginative act of implementation. We must also recognise the need to consider diversification in the direction of mother tongues other than English and Irish.

7.2 Questions

This paper has raised four questions about the present provision for languages at post-primary level:

- *Sustainability of foreign languages.* The learning of foreign languages is not obligatory at post-primary level, and the recent review of the junior cycle curriculum has done nothing to change this. The popular view of languages, held by many school principals and teachers as well as parents, is that they are among the more "academic" subjects and thus not appropriate for everyone. Add to this the argument that "English is enough", and the case for sustaining foreign languages begins to look very weak. If the National University of Ireland decides to abandon its "two languages" matriculation requirement, there will be nothing to prevent a rapid decline of foreign language teaching in our schools. The only way to ensure that this does not happen is to introduce a language policy that clearly recognises the importance of foreign language learning for Ireland's future, and makes it an obligatory part of every student's post-primary education. The success of such a policy would depend, of course, on making appropriate adjustments to existing curricula and forms of assessment.
- *Levels of communicative proficiency achieved by post-primary students.* Despite the strong communicative orientation of the current curricula for foreign languages, doubts persist about the levels of communicative proficiency achieved by post-primary students. The only way of establishing whether or not these doubts are justified is to commission the design of independent tests of proficiency and administer them to students who have just taken the Junior and Leaving Certificate Examinations.
- *Classroom practice*. The principles that define good practice in second and foreign language teaching in 2003 are essentially the same as those that guided the elaboration of communicative language teaching theory twenty-five years ago. The extent to which they govern what happens in our language classrooms is uncertain, though anecdotal evidence suggests (for example) that English is often the dominant medium of classroom communication and that little attempt is made to develop students' taste for extensive reading in their target language(s). A carefully designed survey of teachers and students is the only way of determining whether or not anecdotal evidence can be substantiated empirically.
- *Forms of assessment*. In a system as strongly dominated by assessment as ours, the only sure way of achieving pedagogical reform is by first reforming the examination system. Specifically, priority should be given to developing an approach to assessment that clearly discriminates in favour of those students who are able to use their target language(s) spontaneously—who have moved significantly beyond memorised role plays.

7.3 Challenges

Any attempt to overcome the criticisms and answer the questions raised in this paper must be undertaken in full awareness of the challenges that come from three external sources:

- *Ireland's place in the community of nations.* As a bilingual state Ireland should want to avoid the monolingual complacency that often seems to characterise its nearest neighbour. The arguments in favour of plurilingualism that are central to the cultural, social, political and economic policies of the European Union and the Council of Europe are difficult to rebut, and they certainly cannot be ignored.
- *The Common European Framework and the European Language Portfolio.* The Common Reference Levels of the Common European Framework are set to shape the international assessment of second and foreign language proficiency for many years to come, while the European Language Portfolio has already served to stimulate the reform of second and foreign language pedagogy in various domains of learning in a number of different countries. Neither the CEF nor the ELP can be ignored; and both have much to offer in terms of setting curriculum goals, managing the language learning process, and assessing learning outcomes.
- *Current trends in language teaching.* Research focussed on language pedagogy over the past two decades has confirmed the basic principles of communicative theory. Any reform of curricula and assessment should, above all, seek to create the conditions in which a truly communicative, learner-centred approach can develop and flourish in our language classrooms.

The Introduction to this discussion paper made the point that determining the future of languages in the post-primary curriculum is a highly complex matter that can be adequately dealt with only on the basis of wide-ranging consultation involving all stakeholders. If this process is not to result in an immediate resort to lowest common denominators, and thus no effective progress, the NCCA must provide firm leadership. In particular, if we are to progress beyond the pious hopes that routinely accompany all curriculum reform, the process must be managed in such a way that every proposed change is piloted and carefully evaluated before it becomes part of mainstream practice. Only thus can we hope to make properly informed yet critical use of the Common Reference Levels, the ELP, portfolio assessment, CLIL, computer-mediated communication, and the various other innovations available to us; and only thus can we hope to bring about change that is also improvement.

Appendix 1
The Common Reference Levels–global scale

Proficient User	**C2**	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
Independent User	**B2**	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
Basic User	**A2**	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

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Appendix 2

The Common Reference Levels–self-assessment grid (© Council of Europe)

In the ***Common European Framework*** the five skills form the vertical and the six Common Reference Levels the horizontal axis. The present (reverse) arrangement was adopted in order to facilitate comparison with the global scale (Appendix 1).

	Listening	Reading	Spoken interaction	Spoken production	Writing
C2	I have no difficulty in understanding any kind of spoken language, whether live or broadcast, even when delivered at fast native speed, provided I have some time to get familiar with the accent.	I can read with ease virtually all forms of the written language, including abstract, structurally or linguistically complex texts such as manuals, specialised articles and literary works.	I can take part effortlessly in any conversation or discussion and have a good familiarity with idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms. I can express myself fluently and convey finer shades of meaning precisely. If I do have a problem I can backtrack and restructure around the difficulty so smoothly that other people are hardly aware of it.	I can present a clear, smoothly-flowing description or argument in a style appropriate to the context and with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points.	I can write clear, smoothly-flowing text in an appropriate style. I can write complex letters, reports or articles which present a case with an effective logical structure ,which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points. I can write summaries and reviews of professional or literary works.
C1	I can understand extended speech even when it is not clearly structured and when relationships are only implied and not signalled explicitly. I can understand television programmes and films without too much effort.	I can understand long and complex factual and literary texts, appreciating distinctions of style. I can understand specialised articles and longer technical instructions, even when they do not relate to my field.	I can express myself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. I can use language flexibly and effectively for social and professional purposes. I can formulate ideas and opinions with precision and relate my contribution skilfully to those of other speakers.	I can present clear, detailed descriptions of complex subjects integrating sub-themes, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.	I can express myself in clear, well-structured text, expressing points of view at some length. I can write about complex subjects in a letter, an essay or a report, underlining what I consider to be the salient issues. I can select a style appropriate to the reader in mind.
B2	I can understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar. I can understand most TV news and current affairs programmes. I can understand the majority of films in standard dialect.	I can read articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular attitudes or viewpoints. I can understand contemporary literary prose.	I can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible. I can take an active part in discussion in familiar contexts, accounting for and sustaining my views.	I can present clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects related to my field of interest. I can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.	I can write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to my interests. I can write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view. I can write letters highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences.
B1	I can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. I can understand the main point of many radio or TV programmes on current affairs or topics of personal or professional interest when the delivery is relatively slow and clear.	I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency everyday or job-related language. I can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters.	I can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events).	I can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe experiences and events, my dreams, hopes and ambitions. I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. I can narrate a story or relate the plot of a book or film and describe my reactions.	I can write simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. I can write personal letters describing experiences and impressions.
A2	I can understand phrases and the highest frequency vocabulary related to areas of most immediate personal relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local area, employment). I can catch the main point in short, clear, simple messages and announcements.	I can read very short, simple texts. I can find specific, predict-able information in simple everyday material such as advertisements, prospectuses, menus and timetables and I can understand short simple personal letters.	I can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics and activities. I can handle very short social exchanges, even though I can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation going myself.	I can use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms my family and other people, living conditions, my educational background, and my present or most recent job.	I can write short, simple notes and messages. I can write a very simple personal letter, for example thanking someone for something.
A1	I can understand familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family and immediate concrete surroundings when people speak slowly and clearly.	I can understand familiar names, words and very simple sentences, for example on notices and posters or in catalogues.	I can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things at a slower rate of speech and help me formulate what I'm trying to say. I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics.	I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know.	I can write a short, simple postcard, for example sending holiday greetings. I can fill in forms with personal details, for example entering my name, nationality and address on a hotel registration form.

Appendix 3

Complete list of validated European Language Portfolios, validated as of March 2003

1.2000: Switzerland – Adolescents and adults

2.2000: France – Primary

3.2000: Russian Federation – Upper secondary

4.2000: Germany (Nordrhein-Westphalen) – Lower secondary

5.2000: France – Adolescents and adults

6.2000: EAQUALS/ALTE – Adults

7.2001: Czech Republic – Lower secondary

8.2001: United Kingdom – Primary

9.2001: United Kingdom – Adults (with a particular but not exclusive focus on language learning for vocational purposes)

10.2001: Ireland – Post-primary

11.2001: Ireland – Newcomer pupils learning the language of the host community in primary schools

12.2001: Ireland – Newcomer students learning the language of the host community in post-primary schools

13.2001a: Ireland – Adult immigrants newly arrived in Ireland, learning the language of the host community

13.2001b: Ireland – Adult immigrants who have already spent some time in Ireland and are learning the language of the host community

14.2001: Ireland – Adult immigrants preparing for mainstream vocational training and employment

15.2001: Hungary – Lower and upper secondary

16.2001: Hungary – Primary

17.2001: Hungary – Adults

18.2001: The Netherlands – Upper secondary vocational education

19.2001: Sweden – Upper secondary and adult education, including vocational education

20.2001: Portugal – Learners aged 10-15 years

21.2001: Portugal – Upper-secondary

22.2001: Czech Republic – Learners up to 11 years old

23.2001: Czech Republic – Upper-secondary

24.2001: Austria – Upper-secondary

25.2002: Italy (Umbria) – Lower secondary

26.2002: Italy (Piedmont) – Primary

27.2002: Russian Federation – Students training to be language teachers, translators and interpreters

28.2002: Russian Federation – Primary

29.2002: CERCLES (European Confederation of Language Centres in Higher Education) – Higher education

30.2002: Italy (Lombardy) – Lower secondary

31.2002: Russian Federation – Lower secondary

32.2002a: Germany (Thüringen) – Primary

32.2002b: Germany (Thüringen) – Learners in grades 5 to 9

32.2002c: Germany (Thüringen) – Learners in grades 10 to 12

33.2002: Model awaiting final accreditation

34.2002a: The Netherlands – Learners aged 12+

34.2002b: The Netherlands – Learners aged 15+

35.2002: European Language Council – Higher education

36.2002: Model awaiting final accreditation

37.2002: Model awaiting final accreditation

38.2003: French-speaking Community of Belgium – Primary

39.2003: French-speaking Community of Belgium – Upper secondary

Appendix 4

Validated European Language Portfolios developed in Ireland

10.2001: ELP for language learners at post-primary level

This ELP was developed as the main dissemination instrument of the CLCS Learner Autonomy Project (1997–2001).[73] It comprises (i) a simple "process" language passport, (ii) a detailed language biography built around goal-setting and self-assessment checklists that express the communicative goals of the Junior and Leaving Certificate curricula in terms of the CEF's first four Common Reference Levels (A1 BREAKTHROUGH, A2 WAYSTAGE, B1 THRESHOLD, B2 VANTAGE), and (iii) a dossier that accommodates work in progress as well as completed projects. There is also a trilingual (Irish, English, French) version of the standard adult passport that students can complete at the end of schooling, as well as a handbook for teachers. The languages of presentation are Irish and English, while the languages of process are Irish, French, German, Spanish and Italian. In other words, basic information and explanations are given bilingually, pages that invite reflection on the learning of a particular language or experience of its culture have rubrics in all five curriculum languages, and the checklists are provided separately for each curriculum language. The aim is to encourage learners to use their target language(s) as much as possible. This ELP is available from Authentik, 27 Westland Square, Dublin 2. For further details, see the Authentik website: <www.authentik.ie>.

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[73] D. Little, J. Ridley and E. Ushioda, *Towards greater learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom* (Dublin: Authentik, 2002).

11.2001 and 12.2001: ELPs for newcomers learning English as a second language in primary and post-primary schools

These ELPs were developed by Integrate Ireland Language and Training as one of two basic supports for teachers of English as a second language in primary and post-primary schools. The other support at each level is a set of English language proficiency benchmarks that interpret the first three of the CEF's Common Reference Levels (A1 BREAKTHROUGH, A2 WAYSTAGE, B1 THRESHOLD) in terms of the language that newcomers need in order to access English-medium education. The self-assessment checklists that are central to the language biography in both models are derived from the benchmarks. Since the benchmarks and the first versions of these ELPs were launched in September 2000, IILT has developed a substantial Language Training Manual to help teachers assess their learners on entry to the school, monitor their progress and record their achievement, together with learning materials of various kinds that learners can keep in the dossier section of their ELP. To date more than 5,000 copies of these ELPs have been distributed. Both ELPs and benchmarks can be downloaded from IILT's website: <www.iilt.ie>.

13.2001a and 13.2001b: ELPs for adult newcomers (a) who are newly arrived in Ireland with little or no proficiency in English and (b) who have already spent some time here and/or have some proficiency in English

These ELPs, also developed by IILT, share the same accreditation number because (b) is continuous with (a). They were designed with two learner levels in mind: Reception 1, which caters for newcomers who have little or no English and perhaps little or no education in their mother tongue; and Reception 2, which caters for newcomers who already have some proficiency in English and are literate in their mother tongue. Both models have a simple "process" passport, but learners completing their language training with IILT also receive the trilingual (Irish, English, French) version of the standard adult passport. To date these ELPs have been used with upwards of 1,000 learners in IILT's full-time English courses for adults with refugee status; 2,750 copies have been distributed for use in English language courses for asylum seekers organised by VECs and voluntary organisations; and the Reception 1 model has been translated into Portuguese and published in an edition of 10,000 copies to support the teaching of Portuguese as a second language. These ELPs also served as the initial inspiration for the Milestone ELP (awaiting final accreditation), which was developed collaboratively by IILT and four other organisations responsible for teaching the language of the host community to migrants in Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden. Both ELPs can be downloaded from IILT's website: <www.iilt.ie>; the Milestone ELP will be similarly available in the near future.

14.2001: ELP for adult newcomers preparing for mainstream vocational training and employment

The last of IILT's ELPs is aimed at adult newcomers whose proficiency in English has brought them to the threshold of mainstream vocational training and employment. It is mostly used in the full-time pre-vocational English courses that IILT provides in FÁS Training Centres in Baldoyle, Tallaght and Jervis Street, Dublin. Like the Reception 1 and Reception 2 ELPs, this model has a "process" passport, and the trilingual version of the standard adult passport is again presented to learners when they complete their language training. This ELP is also downloadable from the IILT website: <www.iilt.ie>.

29.2002: CercleS ELP for use in higher education

This ELP is distributed by CercleS (European Confederation of Language Centres in Higher Education). The "canonical" version is bilingual in English and French and was developed in the Centre for Language and Communication Studies, Trinity College Dublin. It is aimed at university learners at all proficiency levels. The goal-setting and self-assessment checklists in

the language biography cover all six Common Reference Levels, from A1 to C2. In due course this ELP is likely to be translated into more than 20 other languages.

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David Little Dublin, May 2003

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