



An Roinn Oideachais
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Department of
Education and Skills

Modern Foreign Languages: A Report on the Quality of Practice in Post-Primary Schools



Modern Foreign Languages: **A Report on the Quality of Practice in** **Post-Primary Schools**

Inspectorate

Department of Education and Skills



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1 Introduction

1.1 Purpose of this report

In *Languages Connect- Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026* and *The Action Plan for Education 2016-2019*, the Inspectorate and the Department of Education and Skills committed to providing positive support for a quality foreign language education for learners. This includes the provision of advice and guidance to schools about using school self-evaluation, school planning to improve foreign language education, and the use of a range of evaluation approaches to monitor and report on the quality of foreign language education. More specifically, under Action 1.C.8 of *Languages Connect*, it was stated that 'the DES [Department of Education and Skills] Inspectorate will provide a statement on the status of foreign language learning in 2019, based on inspection reports, and other inputs, and regularly thereafter'.

This report is designed primarily to provide a picture of the quality of teaching and learning of modern foreign languages in post-primary schools and to help schools and/or individual teachers bring about improvement in modern foreign languages (MFL) teaching and learning. Key findings from post-primary subject inspections in modern foreign languages, undertaken between October 2016 and September 2019, are presented in this document. Over that period, ninety-four MFL subject inspections took place in a broad range of post-primary schools across Ireland.

Since modern foreign languages do not currently form part of the early years and primary school curriculums there are no inspection reports from which to draw data in relation to MFL. However, innovative practices have been noted by inspectors in early learning and care settings and in primary schools in relation to developing language acquisition skills for children whose mother tongue is not English. The report includes a section on those children's experience of learning English as an additional language. It is important to note that the context in early years and primary settings of children with home languages other than English differs from that of students learning a modern foreign language in post-primary schools.

However, both contexts have been included as they align with the principles of languages for all, as outlined in the *Languages Connect* strategy. Furthermore, according to international research, language learning in the early learning and care context, in primary schools, supports MFL learning in post-primary education.

In this way, the report will provide some baseline information for the system on the implementation of *Languages Connect*. It also aims to inform actions that should be taken to ensure that national MFL objectives can be achieved.

1.2 Overview

Ireland is a plurilingual and pluricultural society, fully engaged in a globalised world. Knowledge of foreign languages is essential for our cultural, social and economic development, particularly in the context of a changing international political environment.

In homes across the country, infants are listening to words spoken in English, Irish, Lithuanian, Mandarin Chinese, Polish, Portuguese and a range of other languages. From our first spoken words and phrases, to developing the ability to read and write, language is a critical part of our human identity.

There is a long tradition of learning modern foreign languages in our post-primary education system. Students learn both Irish and English from primary school onwards and a significant number of students study a modern foreign language in post-primary schools. Furthermore, Ireland now has a large cohort of students for whom English is not their first language. The presence of this cohort of students in our schools, together with the fact that students learn two languages in primary school, represents a good opportunity to support modern foreign language learning in this country.

MFL learning in Irish post-primary schools is at a turning point, with a number of recently introduced innovative curricular developments. At junior cycle, a new specification has been introduced for the languages of French, German, Italian, Spanish and short courses such as Chinese Language and Culture and Russian have also been developed. In addition, short courses have been developed for Lithuanian and Polish as heritage languages. Units of learning in languages such as Japanese and Korean are being taught in some schools as part of the Transition Year programme. There are plans in place to add curricular specifications at senior cycle in Lithuanian, Mandarin Chinese, Polish and Portuguese from 2020.

Languages Connect has been developed in the context of the *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019*.¹ One of the aims of the *Action Plan for Education* was to support and develop language education in Ireland. It sets a vision for a society where the ability to learn and use at least one foreign language is taken for granted, because of its inherent value for individuals, society and the economy.²

In *Languages Connect*, four key strategic goals are set:

- 1 Improve language proficiency by creating a more engaging learning environment
- 2 Diversify and increase the uptake of languages learned and cultivate the languages of the new Irish
- 3 Increase awareness of the importance of language learning to encourage the wider use of foreign languages
- 4 Enhance employer engagement in the development and use of trade languages.

The first goal provides a role for the Inspectorate; through its evaluation and advisory processes the Inspectorate can support schools as they strive to provide a quality foreign language education for their learners.³

1 Department of Education and Skills, (2016) *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019*.

2 Ibid.

3 Department of Education and Skills, 2017, *Languages Connect - Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026*.

1.3 MFL: The early learning and care context

Successful early language-learning experiences involve encouraging young children to develop their awareness of and interest in language. This occurs through playful exploration of their mother tongue and by developing emerging interests in other languages through, for example, games, songs, rhymes, posters and cultural days.

Learning a modern foreign language is not typically part of the early learning and care learning experience in Ireland today. However, the Inspectorate's *Early Years Quality Framework*⁴ provides guidance to early learning and care practitioners on how to foster a love of language. In that framework, reference is made to fostering emergent language skills, extending children's language learning during play, valuing and affirming the language the children speak at home and ensuring that these home languages are visible in the print environment of the early learning and care setting. In addition, the framework includes a focus on the learning for children whose mother tongue is not English, these children's appreciation of their home language and their understanding of how different languages can be used with different people and in different situations.

The Early Years Quality Framework supports two of the key strategic goals in *Languages Connect*:

- 1 Improve language proficiency by creating a more engaging learning environment
- 2 Increase awareness of the importance of language learning to encourage the wider use of foreign languages.

1.4 MFL: The primary context

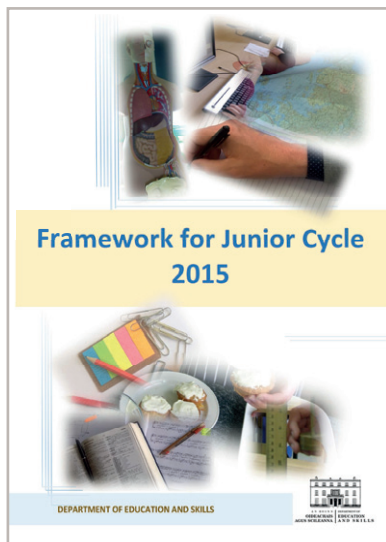
Since the conclusion of the Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative (MLPSI) in 2012, there are no national programmes involving the learning of modern foreign languages at primary level. However, as provided for in *Languages Connect*, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) will publish a Draft Primary Curriculum Framework in the near future. In this document, there is a proposal to include modern foreign languages as a subject area for pupils from third class onwards in primary school.

Furthermore, primary schools have an important role to play in cultivating positive dispositions towards language learning and improving pupils' language proficiency. Teachers can create an engaging and print-rich learning environment where different languages are valued and celebrated. In particular, primary teachers play a crucial role in expanding pupils' vocabulary and in developing their communication skills in English and in Irish; this can impact positively on pupils' future capacity for foreign language learning. As the case studies in section three of this report indicate, supporting students for whom English is an additional language is a further example of how primary schools support overall language development.

1.5 MFL: The post-primary context

Significant reform has taken place at a national level with the introduction of the *Framework for Junior Cycle* in 2015. This skills-based curricular framework incorporates a shared understanding of

4 Department of Education and Skills, 2018, *A Guide to Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI)*.



how teaching, learning and assessment practices should evolve to support the delivery of a quality, inclusive and relevant education that will meet the needs of junior cycle students, both now and in the future. The principles, statements of learning and key skills provide a structure for schools to design their junior cycle programme.

It is in the context of the Framework for Junior Cycle that a single junior cycle specification in modern foreign languages was introduced in 2017. This represents a significant shift in teaching and learning at that stage of education. There is now greater focus on the development of oral skills for learners and on collaboration among teachers of languages.

A key target in the *Languages Connect* implementation plan is to ensure that, by 2026, the percentage of candidates presenting for a junior cycle examination in a MFL increases from 87% in 2016 to 100% in 2026. This is in line with statement of learning two in the Junior Cycle Framework, which notes that the student listens, speaks, reads and writes in L2 and one other language at a level of proficiency that is appropriate to her or his ability. At present, the MFLs available for study at full specification level in junior cycle are French, German, Italian and Spanish.

The specification for junior cycle modern foreign languages is organised around three integrated strands:

- Communicative competence
- Language awareness
- Socio-cultural knowledge and intercultural awareness.

These strands are further broken down into elements and the learning outcomes associated with each element are also specified. Students' language learning is actively supported when their communicative competence, language awareness and socio-cultural knowledge and intercultural awareness are developed in an integrated manner.

The development of short courses in languages represents a more inclusive approach to language teaching. It facilitates students with specific educational needs or students who wish to study an additional language. It also supports students from 'heritage language' backgrounds, that is, students who are familiar with a language at home that is neither English nor Irish.

At senior cycle, significant interventions have occurred to take cognisance of social and economic change. These include the introduction of additional Asian languages in Transition Year. In addition to the traditional MFLs, Japanese, Russian and Arabic are also available as Leaving Certificate Curricular subjects. The aim of such interventions is to diversify the range of languages available for study, respond to economic needs, and promote some of the most widely spoken heritage languages in the country.

2 The Report

2.1 Focus

The Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) evaluates and reports on the quality of educational provision for learners in early-years settings, schools, centres for education and other settings. The Inspectorate also has a support and advisory role when carrying out its evaluations. Through discussion, reporting and publication, the Inspectorate disseminates the findings of its evaluations and publishes advice on how the work of education providers and the learning of children and young people can be improved. This report on modern foreign languages is designed to:

- Encourage and facilitate discourse around the current quality of MFL education in post-primary schools
- Provide exemplars of good language-learning practices across post-primary, primary and early-years sectors
- Provide baseline information about MFL education to inform further implementation of national policy on MFL and against which future progress in implementing that policy can be assessed.

The report explores two key questions in relation to MFL learning in Ireland:

- 1 How effectively are learners engaging with MFL?
- 2 How effective are current teaching practices in MFL?

2.2 Methodology

This report draws on data collated from the ninety-four MFL subject inspections conducted as part of the normal programme of inspection between October 2016 and September 2019. The subject inspection model, with its specific focus on language teaching and learning, provides an informative and rich insight into aspects of practice observed in schools over the 2016-2019 period. The data highlights areas of practice that were found to be working well, as well as areas that require further attention and development.

In addition, a Modern Foreign Languages working group, comprising early years, primary and post-primary inspectors, was convened in 2018. Its remit was to research aspects of the initial implementation of *Languages Connect* within schools. The working group conducted its research during 2019. Guided questions were developed in order to encourage dialogue between inspectors and the schools and settings they visited on areas relevant to the research. During some evaluations, inspectors engaged in conversations with senior management teams, subject co-ordinators, teachers and practitioners to ascertain their awareness of *Languages Connect*. A small number of additional evaluation criteria directly related to *Languages Connect* were included during

inspections conducted in a sample of post-primary schools, primary schools and early learning and care settings.

The additional criteria varied depending on the educational sector that was being inspected. For example, at post-primary school level, the questions asked of teachers, senior management, or subject co-ordinators, included:

- How did the students use the target language?
- Are students participating in language initiatives?
- What diversity of language provision exists for students?
- What promotion of heritage languages, if any, is taking place in the school?
- What is the awareness and promotion of the wider use of languages like in the school?
- What consideration, if any, is given to CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning)?

To promote consistency and inter-rater reliability among inspectors in relation to the application of the additional evaluation criteria, all of the criteria were reviewed by inspectors from all three sectors (early-years, primary and post-primary). Inspectors then assigned quality levels using the Inspectorate’s quality continuum for primary and post-primary schools, as set out in the table below:

Rating	Description
Very Good	Very good applies where the quality of the areas evaluated is of a very high standard.
Good	Good applies where the strengths in the areas evaluated clearly outweigh the areas in need of improvement.
Satisfactory	Satisfactory applies where the quality of provision is adequate.
Fair	Fair applies where, although there are some strengths in the areas evaluated, deficiencies or shortcomings that outweigh those strengths also exist.
Weak	Weak applies where there are serious deficiencies in the areas evaluated.

Inspectors’ ratings were analysed using the five quality levels above. They were further aggregated into two categories: *satisfactory or better* and *less than satisfactory*. *Satisfactory or better* includes the quality ratings *satisfactory*, *good* and *very good*. *Less than satisfactory* includes the quality ratings *fair* and *weak*. Where practice is identified as satisfactory, provision is adequate and improvement is needed in some areas.

Inspectors across all three sectors also identified examples of good practice in schools and settings. These examples form the basis of case studies in this guide.

The domains and standards of *Looking at our School* (2016) also inform this report.⁵

5 Department of Education and Skills, 2016, *Looking at Our School*.

3 Language learning in early learning and care settings and primary schools

3.1 Early learning and care settings

Children in early learning and care settings are at a crucial stage because it is at this stage in their cognitive development that the foundations for their future language learning are developed. Indeed, *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*⁶ is centred on four interconnected themes to support learning and development, two of which are particularly relevant in supporting language development.

In the settings visited by inspectors participating in the MFL working group, a variety of practices around language learning was observed. These included individual practitioner attention to initiating foreign language awareness amongst children, the highlighting of key words, and images with foreign language captions on display around the building. Such practices often focused on the promotion of inclusion and diversity, particularly supporting children from heritage language backgrounds.

For example, in one early learning and care setting, Polish was the first language spoken by the practitioners and by the majority of the children. The practitioners worked to enhance children's vocabulary acquisition and tried to balance listening and speaking to the children in both English and Polish. They used rhymes and action activities to promote children's language development in English. Special occasions were organised throughout the pre-school year to bring the children, their parents and the practitioners together. These included the celebration of Polish festivals, such as 'Tłusty Czwaetek' (Fat Thursday), and opportunities to enjoy *nalesniki* (pastries).

In another setting, families with English as an additional language (EAL) were supported with a 'communication corner' which used symbols to enhance communication with the children and their parents. Prior to the settling-in period, practitioners met with parents. These opportunities were used to build positive relationships and to discuss the various approaches used by the practitioners to support children. They also organised an open day to establish effective settling-in procedures. Practitioners used visual leaflets and a video to further support the EAL children and families in their understanding of the ethos and procedures of the pre-school. Parents were also invited into the pre-school three times during the year, with language support if required, to discuss the children's learning and to explain the learning stories⁷ and experiences. In addition, a visual daily routine, along with a variety of visual displays, conveyed a wide range of information to support the children and families for whom English was an additional language.

In another play-based early learning and care setting the opportunities provided for the children to build the foundations for MFL included a group circle time where the children sang a welcome song to each other using different languages. Children with a different home language were invited to teach each other words in that language and they actively engaged in these activities, asking each

6 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009, *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*

7 A 'Learning Story' is a record that documents a child's learning in an early learning and care setting.

other what the words meant and to repeat them. In the words of one of the practitioners, “The [early learning and care] service believes that positive interactions in how adults communicate with children can greatly encourage children to flourish and reach their full potential. Our aim is to create a warm and welcoming environment that celebrates each of our families’ backgrounds, beliefs, cultures and values”.

3.2 Primary schools

At primary level, recent curriculum developments in language include the introduction of the *Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile*⁸ for all stages in all primary schools. This new curriculum was introduced on a phased basis from 2016 and is now being introduced for pupils of all abilities in all primary schools. The curriculum supports children’s learning in both English and Irish, and makes explicit references to supporting ‘language awareness and cultural awareness’ and ‘linguistic diversity’. It also acknowledges the diversity of languages spoken in our primary schools. It provides for continuity of experience and progression as children make the transition from pre-school to primary school and on to post-primary school.

An important part of the language-learning environment envisaged by the *Primary Language Curriculum* is an emphasis on playful and engaging experiences for younger children. Throughout the school day, children are encouraged to talk and respond with opinions, thoughts and ideas as they develop oral language, reading and writing skills.

In the primary schools included in this research, there were instances of careful and systematic planning, teaching and assessment of language structures and vocabulary, and generally a very good awareness of the correct sequence for development of language. Inspectors also observed an integrated language approach where teachers used similar structures in English and Irish, and pre-taught the specific vocabulary and structures to communicate the intended message.

In one urban co-educational primary school, most pupils spoke English as an additional language. Teachers in that school worked together to design a programme of continuing professional development with a focus on language acquisition strategies. Teachers decided to directly teach key vocabulary using a variety of strategies. These included increasing pupils’ engagement with words and their meaning through the use of visual prompts, classroom displays, analysis of word structure and meaning, and consideration of the origins of particular words. Pupils were encouraged to make connections between words and structures in their home languages. A consistent whole-school emphasis was placed on enabling pupils to feel comfortable to use their home languages during the school day. Specific strategies included making links to pupils’ home languages during regular classroom activities, encouraging pupils to respond to the roll-call in their home language, and counting in a range of languages. Where appropriate, pupils were facilitated to write in their home languages and to create dual-language texts.

Those in leadership positions in the school demonstrated an awareness of the need for pupils to have a sense of belonging to the school and they encouraged teachers to present their classrooms in a way that reflected the specific cultural context of the pupils in their class. Classroom libraries and resources illustrated the cultural and linguistic diversity of the school. The school ran the *Young*

8 Department of Education and Skills, 2019, *Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile*.

Interpreters programme⁹ and engaged with the *Language Explorers* programme¹⁰ and the *Family Learning Project*¹¹. Collaboration with and support from the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and Marino Institute of Education assisted the school in developing their approaches to MFL. The school's inclusion in the *Yellow Flag* programme¹² further helped to consolidate the whole-school commitment to inclusivity, taking into account pupils' varied languages, cultures and ethnicities.

One of the key messages illustrated by schools such as that in the example above is the need to 'keep it simple'; the promotion of language learning is not necessarily anything new, it is about acknowledging the cultural and linguistic heritage of the children in each class, celebrating who they are in a holistic way, and cultivating pride in their home languages. Critically, staff need to come together to reflect collaboratively on and share good practice in teaching and learning.

The following example shows how a primary school staff researched how they might go about developing the language learning ability of their multilingual pupils so that those pupils could access the curriculum using home languages to 'fill in the gaps' in a meaningful way. Essentially, the teachers provided English vocabulary and sentence structures to pupils once the pupils had had an opportunity to engage with the lesson topic in their home language. The teachers chose to involve parents and guardians in this approach and they developed a system whereby younger pupils created 'Think and Talk' scrapbooks containing topic-based pictures which formed the basis of discussion between the child and the parent in their home language. In addition, older pupils used a target language wall in their classrooms where topic-based vocabulary was studied by pupils with their parents in their home languages. In this way, pupils were given the opportunity to develop their conceptual understanding through their home language; this provided them with a framework to which teachers could attach vocabulary and language structures in English.

The teachers reported that this approach was affirming of and motivating for pupils. Home languages now play a more prominent role in events to mark internationalism; for example, a greater range of books in different languages was made available and pupils were invited to write in both English and their home language. Teachers were of the view that the celebration and affirmation of the diversity of home languages have improved learning outcomes for EAL pupils, enriched the language-learning environment for all pupils and enhanced the ways in which parents could support their child's learning and participation in school life.

9 The *Young Interpreters* programme aims to encourage pupils to use their linguistic skills and knowledge to support new pupils with language-learning needs.

10 The *Language Explorers* programme promotes pupils' interest in languages and raises their awareness of linguistic diversity both in the school and in the wider environment.

11 The *Family Learning Project* in the school was a local initiative undertaken by the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator where families were invited to work together to create a large tapestry reflecting the rich linguistic and cultural diversity of the school's population.

12 The *Yellow Flag* programme aims to support schools to become more inclusive of all cultures and ethnicities, celebrate diversity and challenge racism and discrimination.

4 How effectively are learners in post-primary schools engaging with MFL?

Having looked at the early learning and care settings and primary schools, attention is now turned to data emerging from the post-primary sector.

4.1 Learning environment

A key goal of *Languages Connect* is the creation of engaging language-learning environments. Overall, inspectors found that students experienced a satisfactory or better learning environment in 98% of the MFL lessons observed during the subject inspections conducted in post-primary schools. In such cases, learner engagement in language learning tended to be enhanced through, for example, the creation of print-rich environments where student-created work was displayed and celebrated. An example of this was identified in a German subject inspection report:

“A very attractive and stimulating environment has been established in the classrooms where German is taught. Student work and materials that support an Assessment for Learning approach were all in evidence on the walls. In line with best practice, the layout of the classroom furniture is non-traditional and enhances the communicative approach to language teaching and learning”.

In addition, inspectors evaluate teacher-student rapport and the creation of respectful working environments which, in turn, support student learning.

4.2 Learner engagement

Overall findings in relation to learner engagement in language lessons were positive, with the quality of this engagement rated either satisfactory or better in 95% of the lessons evaluated. This suggests that students were ‘on-task’ in lessons. Among the positive practices to enhance learner engagement in language learning noted were teachers’ use of varied questioning strategies, regular review and consolidation of learning, and the provision of meaningfully differentiated content and activities to ensure that all students were challenged by the learning activities and that they experienced success in line with their potential. It is worth noting that in almost 15% of the lessons observed, learner engagement was evaluated as satisfactory, indicating that improvement was needed in some areas. For the small minority of lessons where learner engagement was either fair or weak, it was noted that students lacked concentration during the lesson tasks.

Inspectors also observed very good learner engagement in instances where students were actively using the target language. Students in these lessons were given ample opportunity to further their oral skills and to do so in a way that fostered their confidence and enthusiasm. In addition, teachers paid sensitive attention to individual and whole-class pronunciation. Student use of the target language is an important determinant of successful language learning. However, student use of the target language was deemed as good or very good in only 28% of lessons observed during

the working group evaluations. This finding indicates the need for further teacher engagement with continuing professional development in order to build up teacher confidence and competence in using the target language for both instruction and communication. The importance of target language use by both teacher and students should also be emphasised through initial teacher education as good levels of linguistic competency support greater ease in use of the target language within the classroom. Schools could also consider applying for a language assistant under the *DES Foreign Language Assistant* scheme which has been augmented by the Department under the *Languages Connect* Strategy in order to support target language use in the classroom.

4.3 Student enjoyment and motivation

While there were positive findings about how students engaged in their learning during MFL lessons, student enjoyment and motivation for learning presented a mixed picture, with 93% of lessons found to be satisfactory or better. However, it is worth noting that within the category 'satisfactory or better', 21% of all lesson observations noted that student enjoyment and motivation were at a satisfactory level. This data points to a gap between student engagement and student enjoyment during lessons. Typically, MFL subject inspections highlight a need to provide additional opportunities for active student participation in lessons to enhance their enjoyment and motivation, as well as developing crucial language and communication skills.

MFL SPOTLIGHT 1

In one co-educational post-primary school a real strength was the consistency in practice across French lessons and the highly organised nature of the teachers in the French department. The lessons were characterised by purposeful, well-managed activities that encouraged deep levels of learning. Active learning was also encouraged through pair and group work, for example, classrooms were laid out in formations that allowed students to work easily with one another.

In addition, the French teachers worked closely with the German teachers and a single MFL department was formed. That department also established links with the Irish subject department.

Teachers were clearly focused on the 2017 junior cycle specification, both in the planning and in the delivery of lessons, where the various strands were carefully woven into the lesson structure. As one teacher noted, "No students have textbooks in junior cycle; all teachers rely on the specifications to scaffold students' learning."

The teachers had a number of whole-school supports available to them including a comprehensive induction, a staff handbook, and professional time for collaboration. The sharing of expertise was facilitated through a number of carousel-like fairs where teachers could sample ideas as to how to improve their practice in a range of areas including the use of digital technologies, differentiation, and determining success criteria.

The teachers' combined knowledge of their subject area, their willingness to learn from each other and collaborate led to the establishment of a highly effective subject department. In addition, the senior management team's support for French, including an appropriate allocation of time to the subject and a good spread of lessons across the week, ensured regular contact time with the subject for students.

In their focus on student motivation, inspectors also examined student participation in language initiatives. They found that a number of the schools had developed successful exchange programmes with schools in other countries. Some very good examples of exchange programmes were also identified within subject inspection reports, including a German language exchange providing students with excellent opportunities to experience German culture and language and the opportunity to attend school in Germany. Prior to visiting Germany these students were involved in creating their own video in German as part of the development of exchange of materials for their partner school in Germany.

As participation in exchange programmes comes at a cost to families, some schools were able to avail of both practical and financial support for their exchange programme through initiatives arising out of *Languages Connect*. One such school developed its language exchange with financial support provided through *Post Primary Languages Ireland* (PPLI) under a school exchange scheme. The first visit by the Irish students to a school in France, scheduled for January 2020, was eagerly anticipated by the students, and illustrates how student engagement in language learning can be fostered. As one of their teachers described it:

“We’re so lucky to have this French exchange! We’re going for 11 days, then the French students will come to visit us in March. We’ve set up a group on our IT platform, just to encourage students with phrases to help them in France, things like ‘pass me the salt please’ (“Passe-moi le sel, s’il te plaît”).”

Schools can also consider other opportunities to engage directly with the language and culture of the target language community. These could include, for example, eTwinning. This programme allows schools across Europe to communicate, collaborate and develop projects. eTwinning is co-funded by Erasmus+, the European programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport.

MFL SPOTLIGHT 2

In one all-boys post-primary school with 650 students, three MFLs – French, German and Spanish – were available for study. As Spanish was offered across two option bands at Junior Cycle, students could opt for Spanish and one of the other MFLs.

The school participated in Erasmus+, the EU's programme that provides opportunities for Europeans to develop and share knowledge and experience at institutions and organisations in different countries. The programme in operation in the school gave a great sense of energy and impetus to MFL learning and arose out of a community initiative. The community living in the nearby village was anxious to promote their Viking heritage by linking up with Catoira, Spain, and asked the school to become involved in a student exchange. Catoira's history was commemorated in August with a "Viking Pilgrimage". This unique fiesta featured reconstructions of Viking attacks. All Transition Year students participated in this ERASMUS+ module. They enjoyed regular face-to-face time using digital media during lessons with their Spanish counterparts and worked on projects together.

Overall learner engagement and support for modern foreign languages can be facilitated by the senior management team in schools. It is intended, as *Languages Connect* makes explicit, that 100% of junior cycle candidates present for a foreign language in junior cycle examinations by 2026. This target is challenging for schools, particularly those schools where the uptake of languages has been declining. Teachers and senior management teams are thus urged to show leadership and innovation in promoting foreign language learning for all students.

To support schools on this journey, the PPLI has undertaken a range of actions. These include the development of resources, improved training for language assistants, expanding the communities of practice in MFL, organising language conferences, supporting lesser used languages, supporting language summer camps for heritage language students, and encouraging school libraries to offer resources in home languages. Further professional development is available through other support services, and through the committed work of the language teacher associations at both local and national level.

Typically, larger schools offer a wider range of language options to students. Data published by the Department of Education and Skills in its *Education Indicators for Ireland* (October 2019)¹³ indicates that the percentage of schools offering at least two foreign languages to students is increasing: in 2014, 70% of schools offered at least two foreign languages; by 2018, this had increased to 74% of schools. The recent DES Circular letter 0031/2019 also provides for an additional allocation of hours to incentivise post-primary schools to introduce additional modern foreign languages into their schools. This indicates that student choice as to the language they learn is increasing; it may indicate in some instances that schools are also enabling students to study more than one MFL.

13 Department of Education and Skills, 2019, *Education Indicators for Ireland*.

This is commendable as it supports the aim of *Languages Connect* to diversify the range of language options available to students.

MFL SPOTLIGHT 3

One all-girls post-primary school offered three MFL subjects: French, German and Spanish. The students' Transition Year programme also included compulsory sampling modules in Chinese, Italian and Japanese. Both Chinese and Italian were taught by the school's own staff – the school making full use of the strengths, skills, talents and qualifications of its own teachers. Japanese was taught by an external teacher who also visited other schools as part of the Languages Initiative. Students had the option of continuing with the study of Japanese as an extra subject after school in fifth year and sixth year. Students from other schools were invited to join them.

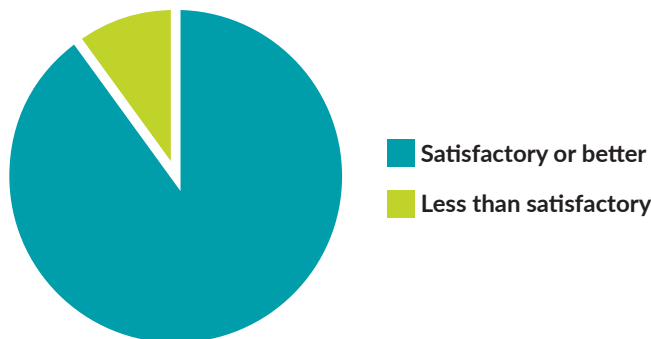
The Transition Year programme also included a European Culture Module for all students which focused on everyday life and issues in France, Spain and Germany. One particular Transition Year activity included a treasure hunt for student teams, each made up of a French, German and Spanish student, in the nearby park. Clues were written in a mixture of MFLs to ensure team collaboration. On Languages Day, the school gathered first, second and fifth-year students together and all international students were invited to say and teach a few words of their own language to their peers.

5 How effective are current teaching practices in MFL?

5.1 Attainment of learning objectives

Findings in relation to the attainment of language lesson learning objectives were somewhat mixed. In 74% of the MFL lessons observed, the attainment of learning objectives was found to be either 'good' or 'very good,' 16% of the lessons were noted to be satisfactory and the remaining 10% were either fair or weak. Furthermore, in just 68% of all MFL lessons observed, the use of assessment to support language learning was found to be 'good' or 'very good', and almost 23% of the lessons observed were satisfactory in this regard. Where inspectors identified shortcomings in how assessment strategies were being used to support learning, the subject inspection reports advised on how this could be improved, for example, by revisiting the learning intentions during the lesson, by including a student review of learning as a concluding activity, or by extending the provision of formative feedback so that students understand and can act on the advice given by their teacher.

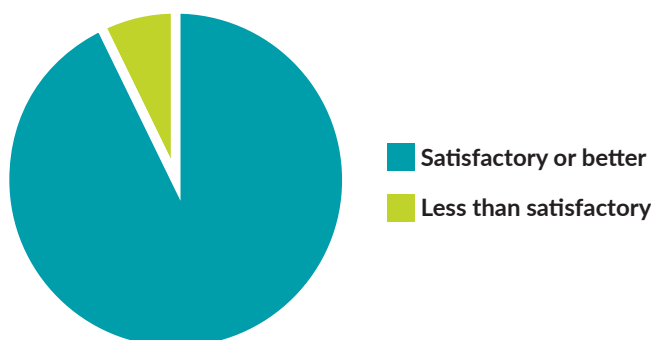
Attainment of learning objectives



5.2 In-class support for learning needs

In-class support for students' individual language-learning needs was deemed as 'good' or 'very good' in 71% of the lessons observed and, in 22% of the lessons, support was deemed to be satisfactory.

In-class support for learning needs



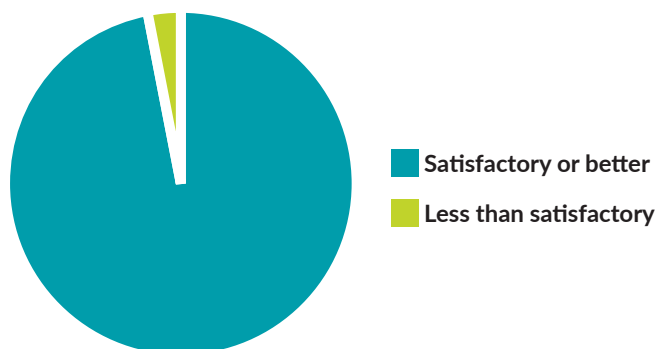
This finding is particularly relevant in the context of creating a more engaging learning environment and points to a need, within a significant number of schools, for greater understanding and use of differentiation by teachers and increased collaboration within language/MFL subject departments. In the context of junior cycle reform and a common level specification, greater collaboration should enhance the possibilities to develop strategies that support students of all academic abilities during language lessons. Such strategies could include the development of team teaching within the subject department in order to maximise outcomes for students.

5.3 Preparation for teaching and classroom management

Good to very good preparation for teaching was evident in 83% of the MFL lessons observed and, in a further 13% of lessons, preparation was satisfactory. To build on this positive finding, ongoing engagement with the support services to facilitate teachers in maintaining and enhancing their pedagogical, linguistic and socio-cultural competence is advised.

In addition, classroom management was deemed to be satisfactory or better in almost 99% of the lessons observed; this is an important factor in ensuring that classroom environments are conducive to learning.

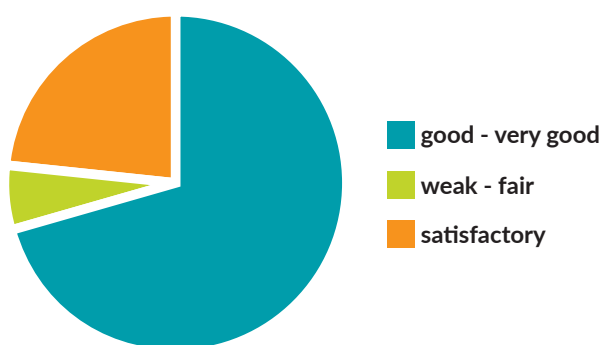
Preparation for Teaching



5.4 Teaching approaches

The overall data relating to teaching approaches shows that just over 6% of the lessons observed had teaching approaches that were found to be at the lower end of the quality continuum (either weak or fair), almost one quarter of the lessons (23%) were found to have satisfactory teaching approaches and 70% of lessons were judged to be 'good' or 'very good'. This suggests that there is some scope for development in teaching approaches in order to optimise student outcomes.

Teaching approaches



Frequently, inspection reports refer to a lack of opportunities for students to engage actively in their language learning and an over-emphasis on teacher talk as features of lessons where the quality of teaching needs to be further developed. Achieving a better balance between teacher talk and student talk would improve student learning as it should lead to greater opportunities for students to engage in the target language both with their teacher and with each other. In the specific context of MFL lessons, greater use of the target language by both teachers and students is critical. The target language in a lesson is the language that students are learning, so in a junior cycle classroom, for example, it would typically be either French, German, Italian or Spanish. Learners need opportunities to speak in the target language in every lesson, and should be afforded regular opportunities to practise newly acquired target language in different contexts.

Good practice in this regard has, of course, been highlighted in some inspection reports: “Teacher use of the target language was excellent and German was used in all lessons to optimal effect. Student use of the target language was very good and the learners were given ample opportunity in lessons to progress their oral skills.”

The Inspectorate MFL working group examined the extent to which CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) teaching approaches featured in the schools observed. This is in line with Action 1.E.3 within *Languages Connect* which seeks to pilot CLIL for Transition Year, “where there is teacher capacity, for example Business/German, History/French”. Data gathered, however, indicates that while teachers and principals spoke positively about the benefits of CLIL no examples of this methodology were identified in practice. Going forward, there is scope to develop strategies that facilitate a CLIL approach to MFL teaching. A pilot CLIL programme in MFL is currently in progress, under the leadership of PPLI and NUI Maynooth, with a view to increasing and expanding participation as the programme evolves.

5.5 In-school supports for EAL students

During the inspection visits conducted as part of the MFL working group tasks, inspectors also noted a number of examples of good practice in relation to supporting students for whom English is an additional language. In one of the schools visited, students from member states of the European Union sat the non-curricular examinations at Leaving Certificate level. The State Examinations Commission provides these examinations in a range of subjects in the language area which do not appear as part of the normal school curriculum but which students may opt to be examined in if they meet certain criteria. For example, Finnish, Croatian and Dutch are EU languages which are available for examination where candidates meet certain conditions.

The recent introduction of short courses in Lithuanian and Polish, as well as the upcoming introduction of specifications in Lithuanian, Polish and Portuguese, also presents an opportunity for schools to further promote the heritage languages and greater linguistic diversity. The provision of support for non-native speakers to develop their capacity in the English language was also observed in a number of the early learning and care settings and primary schools visited. This indicates that, while MFL teaching is not embedded in these sectors, worthy efforts are being made in primary schools and early learning and care settings to meet the needs of learners from heritage language backgrounds. In addition, it is worth acknowledging the range of supports offered by the PPLI for heritage languages, including resources, leaflets, CPD and the provision of peripatetic teachers.

6 Summary of Findings and recommendations for development

6.1 Overall findings

- **How effectively are learners engaging with MFL in post-primary schools?**
 - › Inspectors found that students experienced a satisfactory or better language-learning environment in 98% of the MFL lessons observed during the subject inspections conducted in post-primary schools.
 - › The quality of learner engagement in language lessons in post-primary schools was found to be satisfactory or better in 95% of the lessons evaluated; this augurs well for successful language learning.
 - › Findings in relation to student enjoyment and motivation for learning indicated that 72% of lessons were found to be 'good' or 'very good' in this regard and a further 21% of the lessons observed were satisfactory.
 - › A number of schools have shown leadership in developing successful exchange programmes with schools in other countries.

- **How effective are current teaching practices in MFL in post-primary schools?**
 - › Classroom management was found to be satisfactory or better in almost 99% of the language lessons observed in post-primary schools; this is an important factor in ensuring conditions that are conducive to language learning.
 - › Good to very good preparation for teaching was evident in 83% of the MFL lessons observed and, in a further 13% of lessons, preparation was satisfactory.
 - › Teaching approaches were judged to be 'good' or 'very good' in 70% of lessons, almost one quarter of the lessons (23%) were found to be 'satisfactory', and in a small minority there was significant scope for development of teaching approaches.
 - › In 75% of the MFL lessons observed, the attainment of learning objectives was found to be either 'good' or 'very good,' with a further 16% deemed as satisfactory.
 - › In 68% of all MFL lessons observed, the use of assessment to support language learning was found to be 'good' or 'very good'; a further 23% of lessons were satisfactory.
 - › In-class support for students' individual language-learning needs was 'good' or 'very good' in 71% of the lessons observed; a further 22% of lessons were satisfactory.

- › Current supports for speakers of heritage languages include provision of the non-curricular language examinations in post-primary schools. In addition, the PPLI provides a range of support for heritage languages, including resources, leaflets, CPD and the provision of peripatetic teachers.
- › Principals and teachers spoke positively about the potential benefits of a CLIL approach, particularly for Transition Year students; however, a CLIL approach was not observed in the schools where the Modern Foreign Languages working group engaged in conversations to ascertain local awareness of *Languages Connect*.

6.2 Next steps:

In light of the findings, and the goals within *Languages Connect*, consideration should be given to the following next steps.

- › In many instances, more opportunities to promote engaging student-centred learning are needed; these should include greater use of the target language by both teachers and students, active student participation in learning, and the development and promotion of language initiatives such as school exchange programmes. Teachers should also consider opportunities to develop and promote the subject, including engaging co-curricular and extra-curricular programmes.
 - › Data gathered from subject inspections indicates the need for teachers to engage with ongoing continuing professional development (CPD) in order to support effective MFL teaching practices. Such CPD could include accessing relevant digital resources, availing of courses in local education centres, and study visits to the target language country.
 - › Ongoing support for the heritage languages is advised in line with the goals of *Languages Connect*. This includes availing of the short courses in Lithuanian and Polish, as well as the upcoming introduction of new curricular specifications in a number of languages. It is an opportunity to further support a cohort of students for whom English may not be their first language.
 - › The pilot programme in CLIL presents an opportunity for all involved in the leadership and promotion of language learning to further investigate the merits of, and opportunities for, introducing CLIL into Transition Year programmes.
- **Initial Teacher / Practitioner education**
 - › For post-primary student teachers, the importance of target language use by both teacher and students should be emphasised during initial teacher education as good levels of linguistic competency support greater ease in use of the target language within the classroom.
 - › To support initial teacher/practitioner education, programmes should consider including modules based on second and subsequent language learning, immersion and bilingual education.

- › The introduction of modules to support the integration of languages in the early learning and care context and primary schools merits consideration, as do opportunities to prepare post-primary student teachers for the introduction of CLIL in Transition Year.

Teacher / Practitioner continuing professional development (CPD)

- › Ongoing emphasis on target language use by both teacher and students, to include regular visits to the target language country where possible, is advised. Teachers are encouraged to avail of and explore the opportunities available through digital learning, from the Department of Education and Skills, the support services and the relevant cultural services.
- › Teacher/practitioner CPD should include a blend of theoretical and practical studies of language learning and acquisition based on best practice and planning, and that is cognisant of the range of student abilities.
- › In schools where CLIL is being considered, the provision of CPD for delivering other subjects through a modern foreign language is advised.
- › Greater student use of a wider range of formative assessment strategies, to include student self-assessment, peer-assessment and student portfolio work, are suggested in order to enhance outcomes for learners.

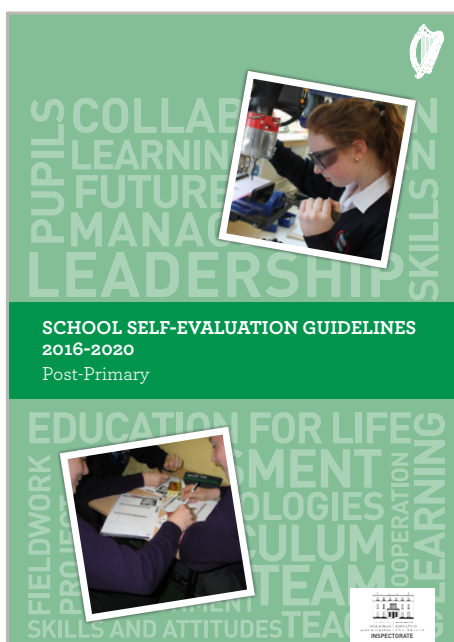
The Department of Education and Skills

- › As literacy skills have improved significantly, the consideration being given to re-instating Modern Languages in primary schools initiative is timely.
- › Regular linguistic upskilling in MFL, as part of teacher CPD, is strongly encouraged.

Curriculum / policy

- › Curriculum and policy developers should emphasise the importance of target language use in the classroom and the teacher's central role as a linguistic model. Furthermore, greater emphasis should be placed on CLIL.
- › The implementation of the actions set out within *Languages Connect* should continue to be progressed in a timely manner.
- › Consideration should be given to the NCCA review of the Primary Curriculum in terms of MFL provision.
- › The introduction of the four new specifications for Leaving Certificate modern foreign languages should be progressed to meet the context of students' language learning as they emerge from junior cycle.

7 Reflecting on MFL – The school self-evaluation process



For language teachers, it may be useful to continue to use the six-step school self-evaluation process to affirm areas of MFL practice that are working well in the school as well as areas of MFL provision that might benefit from further review and development.

School self-evaluation (SSE) is a collaborative, reflective process focused on whole-school improvement. It provides a process for schools to focus on areas of priority, to identify strengths and areas for development, and to plan for and bring about any necessary improvements in teaching and learning. SSE may be used at both whole-school level and subject department level. There should be a two-way flow of information between whole-school areas of focus and areas of focus identified at subject department level. Schools may choose to organise SSE at subject department level in order to lead to a subject department improvement process that will form part of the school's overall improvement planning.

As *Languages Connect* indicates, Goal 1 focuses on 'Creating a more engaging learning environment'. This includes a provision that the Department's Inspectorate will, through its evaluation and advisory processes, provide positive support for a quality foreign language education for learners. This will also include advice and guidance to schools about using school self-evaluation, school planning to improve foreign language education, and a range of evaluation approaches to monitor and report on the quality of foreign language education.

In that context, it is suggested that MFL subject departments consider applying the school self-evaluation six-step process to their own internal reviews. In this regard, schools are encouraged to use both *Looking At our School*¹⁴ and the *School Self-Evaluation*¹⁵ guidelines.

14 Department of Education and Skills, 2016, *Looking at Our School*.

15 Department of Education and Skills, 2016, *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines 2016-2020*.

Using school self-evaluation to support reflection in your subject department



Using SSE to support MFL teaching and learning – a practical example

	Whole-School	Modern Foreign Languages Department
Identify focus	<p>Example:</p> <p>Improve the learner experience with a view to enhancing student wellbeing and supporting better learning outcomes</p>	<p>Ask questions of ourselves as teachers, e.g.</p> <p>Are we, as teachers, presenting students with rich and appropriately challenging tasks that support development of their language skills?</p>
Gather evidence	<p>Focus group of students</p> <p>Questionnaire for all/sample of students</p>	<p>Listen to the student voice in our language classes and determine what tools to use in gathering valid and reliable evidence from students</p> <p>Examine students' work to ascertain levels of student engagement, enjoyment and motivation</p>
Analyse and make judgements	<p>How good is the learner experience in our school?</p> <p>What do we need to improve on?</p>	<p>How good is the MFL learner experience?</p>
Write and share report and improvement plan	<p>The areas of the school-wide learner experience that are good and the areas as identified in need of improvement</p> <p>Set SMART targets</p>	<p>Finding: 'Teachers regularly develop challenging activities for students; however, more activities could stem from their own interests and questions'</p> <p>Detail the findings from the MFL students</p> <p>Set SMART targets for the development of rich and deep learning tasks for MFL students</p>
Put improvement plan into action	<p>Cross-departmental and whole-school collaboration on how to implement the targets to improve the learner experience</p>	<p>Collaboration within the MFL department on how to implement the progression of the identified targets</p>
Monitor actions and evaluate impact	<p>Was the process manageable?</p> <p>Monitor progress</p> <p>Were the targets realised?</p> <p>How did the improvement plan support improvement in the learner experience with a view to enhancing student wellbeing and supporting better learning outcomes?</p> <p>Was the process meaningful?</p>	<p>Monitor progress</p> <p>Were the targets realised?</p> <p>How did the improvement plan support improvement in the provision of rich and appropriately challenging tasks that support development of language skills?</p> <p>Was the process manageable/ meaningful in the MFL department?</p> <p>How can we continue to support the process?</p>

Acknowledgements

Our sincere thanks to the following schools and early learning and care settings from which examples of good practice in language teaching and learning were drawn:

Toad Hall Childcare, Kildare town, Co. Kildare

Young Explorers Club, Dublin 15

Bright Minds, Co. Sligo

St. Mary's Primary School, Dublin 7

St. Joseph's National School, Co. Longford

St. Colmcille's Girls National School, Swords, Co. Dublin

Celbridge Community School, Co. Kildare

St Mary's Holy Faith Secondary School, Glasnevin, Dublin 11

De la Salle College, Dundalk, Co. Louth

This report is designed to provide a picture of the quality of teaching and learning of modern foreign languages (MFL) in post-primary schools and to help schools and/or individual teachers to bring about improvement in MFL teaching and learning.

Key findings from post-primary subject inspections in modern foreign languages, undertaken between October 2016 and September 2019, are presented in this report.

Although modern foreign languages do not currently form part of the early years and primary school curriculums, innovative practices have been noted by inspectors in those sectors. The report includes a section on the experience of children from those sectors of learning English as an additional language.

The report will provide some baseline information for the system on the implementation of *Languages Connect*. It also aims to inform actions that should be taken to ensure that national MFL objectives can be achieved.

