

## **Submission from Niall P Tracey**

I am currently working as an English teacher in a French university, and have long term plans to be a teacher of languages when I return to Scotland.

I feel the final question in the call for comments is a dangerous question, in that it inadvertently presupposes a particular policy:

- △ *The role of languages in economic development – what languages should children be learning to benefit their future careers, and to help Scotland flourish economically?*

There are two assumed features of the policy to be adopted:

1. that the languages should be chosen for reasons of utility and
2. that there should be a restricted list of languages.

On the first point, it is very difficult to predict what foreign languages, if any, will rise to prominence in the next twenty years; and regardless, current evidence shows that the only single language linked to international economic success is English. Attempting to find a utility measure for languages at the school level is therefore a distraction from the main goal of improving language provision.

On the second point, we risk robbing ourselves of the best possible resources we have to hand. The population of teachers in Scotland is very broad and varied, and while most are Scots-born monolinguals, there are also immigrants from various countries, as well as the second-generation of immigrant families who still retain their ancestral languages in the home. The secondary syllabus has space for Community Languages in addition to Modern Foreign Languages, but the list here is very heavily restricted and the option is not available in a great number of schools.

If we look at the case of Ireland, the policy of universal Irish language teaching is widely regarded as a failure. Teachers with no real command of the language cannot teach effectively, and teachers who have no love of the language cannot motivate and enthuse the students.

In order to teach effectively at the primary level, we need teachers who are comfortable and confident in the language they are teaching, and who are teaching out of choice rather than obligation. The level of competence required cannot be achieved with schemes such as Gaelic for Learners in the Primary School. (I would comment that I have heard good feedback from several primary teachers involved in the GLPS scheme, but that at present, teachers in the scheme are a self-selecting minority, all of whom are personally motivated to work with the language. There is no reason to believe that the scheme would continue to be successful if it was imposed on unwilling or unmotivated teachers.)

My belief, therefore, is that language teaching should be encouraged and invested in, but that the choice of language should be entirely at the discretion of the teacher. If the teacher speaks Afrikaans or Aymara, Tongan or Tibetan, the teacher should be free to use that in the class, and not forced to struggle through on pidgin French or Spanish simply because the syllabus demands it.

## **Opportunities to build language competence in teachers**

Around a year ago, I wrote to the ministry suggesting that a special effort should be made in encouraging newly-qualified teachers to take a year abroad in order to reduce the

number of teachers completing their probationary year and finding themselves without work. As the provision of languages at primary level has been a goal for many years, this would be a definite career advantage to any candidates taking up such an offer.

In particular, I would draw the committee's attention to the situation in France. I am currently working as a "lecteur". This is a junior teaching post for graduates with a minimum 4 years of university education, hence any BEd(hons) or PGDE graduate would fulfill the entry criteria.

The problem faced by most universities is that most candidates for these posts have no knowledge or experience of teaching, so the experience for the students varies considerably from year to year.

It is therefore extremely likely that the proposal of a system which would provide a reliable supply of fully-trained teachers with at least one year of classroom experience would be welcomed by the French universities, even despite differences in class age groups.

I would propose a scheme of the following structure:

- ⤴ Fully qualified and registered teachers are recruited for French universities in Scotland.<sup>1</sup>
- ⤴ An intensive summer course in teaching English, equivalent to the Cambridge CELTA or Trinity TESOL, is provided for successful candidates.<sup>2</sup>
- ⤴ Intensive French lessons would be given to each candidate prior to the beginning of the academic year.<sup>3</sup>
- ⤴ The yearly salary would be provided by the host institution.<sup>4</sup>
- ⤴ Ongoing language tuition should be made available by the host institution throughout the year.<sup>5</sup>

I would propose the following division of costs:

- ⤴ Scottish Government to pay for English-teaching tuition.
- ⤴ French Government to provide intensive French tuition.
- ⤴ Host universities cover the costs of ongoing tuition.
- ⤴ Recruitment costs to be split between Scottish and French governments.

I believe the costs to each body are more than compensated for by the benefits.

The cost to the Scottish Government would likely be no more than the cost of providing equivalent language training alone directly. However, the experience of a year living and working in the language, at no additional cost to the Scottish public purse, would be

---

1 I suggest this mainly for teachers after their probationary year, but there's no reason this couldn't also be offered as a sabbatical scheme to continuing teachers.

2 A significant part of the cost of current Celta and Trinity TESOL certificate courses is the accreditation by Cambridge and Trinity respectively. The certification is of much reduced relevance to people already holding a university-level teaching qualification, and as candidates on my proposed scheme are assumed not be looking for further English-teaching work, putting them on an accredited course would be inappropriate. However, this scheme could make use of the excellent installed base of CELTA and TESOL trainers already in Scotland. In the longer term it may even provide the basis for a new Scottish qualification in the teaching of English to young adults.

3 The most practical option would be to host these centrally in a French university and have the teachers attend the course en route to their final host university.

4 French universities are part of the public sector, so employees are considered public functionaries. Salaries are non-negotiable and set by statute.

5 This language tuition could again be French and/or a local minority language that is taught in the university, eg Basque or Breton.

invaluable to the teachers and hence to the Scottish education system.

France, for its part, would be taking steps to fulfill its current policies on language competence, which stipulate that language is obligatory in almost all higher education, again at no great cost.

The only increase in cost to the host universities would be the marginal cost of ongoing language tuition, which many already offer, and which is a marginal cost against the guarantee of a well-trained, highly motivated classroom teacher, and therefore better pass rates for their students.<sup>6</sup>

### **The transition from primary to secondary**

Having a truly open choice of languages at primary might seem an invitation to disaster at the secondary level, but I would argue the opposite.

Teaching at university level, my students all come from very different backgrounds, hence different high schools. The level of English varies from student to student, and the material they have learned is a result of what has been taught at their various schools. Even though they have had nominally the same education, in practice they are very different. This makes my job extremely difficult, and reduces my value to each individual student.

If the Scottish Government or local councils were to mandate that feeder primaries taught the same languages as used in the secondaries, this would reproduce the issues I currently face in all our secondary schools, as it is inevitable that different primaries would achieve different results with their pupils.

If given the choice between teaching Spanish at high school to a mixed group who had been learning Spanish since P1 at different primary schools, or a mixed group who had learned completely different languages since P1, I would choose the latter. Their previous exposure to language learning would aid them considerably in picking up Spanish, and their shared level of Spanish knowledge (zero) would mean that tasks could be designed and selected that are suitable for all. This is vitally important, because if the tasks are not suitable for all students, it is in practical terms impossible for the teacher to motivate the class, and so there is a real risk that progress in language would be halted at the transition to secondary.

I would therefore suggest that the introduction of a third language at P5 might prove to be counterproductive, and that leaving the third language until secondary would avoid difficult-to-manage mixed-level classes.

In summary, I believe that the choice of language in the primary school should be independent of the local secondary provision and based directly on individual teachers' skills and competencies, and that the best time to introduce a third language is at entry to secondary school, to avoid the situation where classes suffer due to extreme differences in previous knowledge and ability. I believe that we can also leverage the worldwide demand for high quality English teaching to help our primary teachers gain the language competence required to make primary language teaching successful.

---

<sup>6</sup> Most language assessment is now performed centrally, under a French government scheme called CLES. This is intended to ensure that all universities provide equivalent standards of language tuition.