

## **Submission from John Morton**

I understand that you are seeking views on what languages should be taught in schools.

First of all, having moved to Scotland a little over a decade ago and, indeed, having taken up the Gaelic, I was somewhat surprised to find that, where I stay, in the Kingdom of Fife, there is not one school where Gaelic is available, either as a medium of teaching or as a second language (as French, German &c are usually taught). This is a major difference between Scotland and Wales: in Wales, it is compulsory to learn English, up to a basic level of understanding – and the same is true of Welsh – wherever you are in Wales.

Also, those parts of Wales that have a majority of Welsh speakers actually find this reflected in their local education – a majority of schools, at all levels, in those areas are primarily for education through the medium of Welsh. This contrasts starkly with the situation here, where Gaelic-medium education is actually easier to come by in thoroughly “anglicised” areas such as Glasgow or Edinburgh than it is in, say na h-Eileanan an Iar, where Gaelic is still very much the community language.

But that is just one specific – the relationship between English and Gaelic in Scottish schools. Regarding those two languages, it is my view that all children in Scotland should have the opportunity to learn both, regardless of the medium of education. Some claim that forcing Welsh down the throats of English-speaking children in Wales was a step too far: I’m not so sure, but it is a fact that you cannot eliminate “master-slave” relationships simply by reversing the situation. Thus I say “opportunity” rather than, say, “duty”. As regards Gaelic, this opportunity is currently missing in the Kingdom – and also in several other parts of Scotland, even some that actually have a reasonably strong and recent Gaelic tradition.

As regards non-Scottish languages, e.g. French, German, Welsh, Chinese, Arabic etc., it is well to look at what use there is from learning languages. The usual reasons given, especially when promoting somewhat “new” (to general education) languages like Mandarin, Russian or Arabic, is that they are widely-spoken world languages and knowing them opens up many doors. But that is not the only reason for learning other languages. There’s also the aspect of tourism – to this day, little phrasebooks for Spanish, French, Italian, German etc sell well throughout the UK, as people generally like to have some idea about what all the signs they’re seeing actually mean and how to say “two lagers and a chicken tandoori please” in Serbo-Croat or whatever. But neither of these – important as they are to many people – is the main reason why learning other languages is generally a “good thing”.

The main reason is one of general educational and psychological development. Each language has “its own way” of doing things, of saying things, of expressing concepts. For instance, somebody unfamiliar with Greek, Welsh or Gaelic might have a very limited idea as to what constitutes “blue”, or “green”, or “orangey-brown”, or “grey”. Exposure to a variety of languages is very beneficial for personal development.

At present (leaving aside the major lacuna as regards Gaelic provision throughout Scotland), opportunities for children to learn other languages are too limited. For instance, my son had a brief encounter with French at primary school, followed by a year or two of German at secondary school, and now has no exposure to any other language than English at school, as

the school just does not have the resources to provide language teaching for all children at or below Standard Grade. This is especially bad, considering I actually asked my son recently what language(s) he thought in. His answer – usually English, occasionally German. That is, his 2-year introduction to German was enough to establish the seed within him, but this is now withering and dying through lack of continuation. I must say he's pretty bright, expecting generally good Standard grades in what he's doing (mainly science subjects) and with an eye to higher education (if it still exists by then), but, as regards general personal development, the school is failing him by not providing languages.

That is not to say that the school should transfer resources to language teaching, for that implies "from some other teaching" and all the teaching the school does is useful. It is just that, in common with every other public-sector school in Scotland, it is underfunded. Obviously, this ultimately comes down to priorities set in the Scottish budget.

Anyway, aside from English and Gaelic (which should be available to all schoolchildren in Scotland), I'm not unduly concerned about what languages should be taught. As Bill Gates once said, in relation to computing, "If you can program in anything you can program in anything", i.e. once you've mastered the art of programming in one computer language it's pretty straightforward to transfer your skills to programming in another language. The main difference between English and Gaelic, on the one hand, and other languages, is that a Scottish child is highly likely to use either (or both) of English and Gaelic as their "native" language and, when it comes to other languages, to "map" them onto it somehow – just as nobody actually speaks Java, Basic, Pascal or C++, for instance. But the more one knows about other languages, the more one gets into their way of thinking and the more agile one becomes in their environment. This is what we need to be teaching – the ability to be flexible, to think outside our native box as it were – and the medium we use for this is fairly irrelevant.

Dùrachdan,  
(tron post-d)