



European and External Relations Committee

Foreign language learning in primary schools

Submission from ATL Scotland

ATL is the union for education professionals across the UK. Active in the maintained, independent and post-16 sectors, we use our members' experiences to influence education policy, and we work with government and employers to defend pay, conditions and career development. From early years to HE, teachers to support staff, lecturers to leaders, we support and represent our members throughout their career.

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Introduction

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the European and External Relations Committee's call for written evidence to its 'Foreign language learning in primary schools' inquiry. Within our submission we have sought to offer a cross section of the responses from members; having replicating the questions within the call to evidence in a survey to members.

Is there enough funding for the Scottish Government's proposal (including use of EU money)?

We believe that there will be a need for increased funding to take forward the Scottish Government's ambitions within the education system albeit not necessarily significantly at a local authority or school level. It may well be that the increased funding relates to the desired changes to initial teacher education to ensure that upon qualification primary school teachers are able, confident and equipped to promote a '1+2 languages' agenda.

Member feedback included:

- "Greater funding would be good but, the current funding could also be better directed. More language resources need to be available. We need more teachers who are trained in other languages. The most efficient way is to get student teachers learning languages."
- "Probably not. Most new schemes are underfunded."
- "No. There is not enough funding to train current teachers in French for primary schools."
- "...there will need to be considerable investment in resources including a big increase of IT for this project to stand any chance of success."

- “No - there will need to be a great deal of investment in training sessions for Primary teachers up to an adequate level in the language or a language specialist for the school. A great deal of money will also need to be used to buy resources that are fun and enjoyable for the age group.”

Do existing teachers have the skills and teaching resources available for language tuition? Are existing teachers and teaching assistants equipped to teach languages? Should there be more training and support for new and existing teachers for language teaching?

We believe that it is difficult to give accurate answers to the first two questions without first conducting a skills audit of existing teachers and teaching assistants. This should be conducted in parallel with a school audit of resources. There is a temptation to automatically answer ‘Yes’ to the third question regarding additional support, as more will be asked of existing teachers than currently practised. We believe, however, it would be better to first ascertain exactly what that support should be. We hope that the current pilot schemes will give a clear steer as to what support may be required.

Member feedback included:

- “No, they will not have the necessary skills and they will require a large degree of skills and confidence building which will all take time and money”
- “Very few Primary teachers have a background or first degree in MFL. There will be a huge need for support/training to bring the majority up to the standard required to teach any language properly.”
- “More support is needed for student teachers. I'm learning another language on my own time and expense because my course doesn't support it. If the number of language teachers is to increase then, the current student teachers need to be able to access language learning. If we can't do it during our degree course then, when are we going to do it?”
- “Some are. In East Renfrewshire, current steps are being taken to train even more teachers to teach French. Probably schools could do with more mother-tongue teaching assistants and visitors.”

What is the capacity within the curriculum to accommodate greater language study? Can language learning be embedded in existing teaching?

Curriculum for Excellence should offer increased capacity for accommodating greater language study. There will always however be a tension with the ability to ask more of the curriculum and as such there may be an opportunity cost of engagement with another topic or subject matter.

Member feedback included:

- “Many other countries with different education systems manage to incorporate language teaching into their curriculum. Scotland should be doing the same.”
- “To include another language will require the reduction of time given to another area within the curriculum.”
- “Yes. If Scotland adopted an immersion approach to languages within the classroom, languages could be taught within other subjects and within the daily routine.”
- “Yes, Language is language, literature and science Health and Wellbeing can all be incorporated in learning another language.”

- “No. I am already squeezed to fit one ML in to my P7 class. Two would mean that something else would have to go.”
- “During visits to Primary Schools (I am training in Secondary), I have seen some great attempts to embed language into teaching by using commands in the target language and this is greatly beneficial. Perhaps part of the day (once a week, one day, one morning) could become an immersion class where the pupils are exposed only to the language they are learning.”
- “Yes, definitely it is all about global citizenship, can be linked to music, expressive arts, numeracy, literature (foreign language poetry and books) and so on.

The choice of languages for teaching – which languages should children be learning and why?

We believe that the very learning of a foreign language in of itself is beneficial; as has been pointed out by witnesses to the Committee’s inquiry at the oral evidence sessions and recognised in the report and recommendations from the Scottish Government Languages Working Group.

Member feedback included:

- “French as it is the language of the UN and it is very easy to travel to, it can also be used in different countries on the continent of Africa. Spanish as it is very useful when travelling. Mandarin as this will be needed for future trade when we will do most of our trade with China”
- “Spanish because it is spoken by so many different countries. Maybe French because of how close we are to them. I am told that learning Mandarin is very important - I disagree.”
- “French, German and Spanish are still the most commonly taught languages in Secondary schools and are very useful considering our position in Europe. Gaelic would be another option and it would be wonderful to see this language become more widespread in Scotland. Mandarin would also be a wise choice for the future considering it has the most speakers in the world.”
- “Any MFL which can be taught properly and where quality and continuity can be provided beyond the primary level.”

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

We would reiterate our comments in the previous section.

Member feedback included:

- “All languages can be beneficial in economic development. French, German, Spanish open up trade with our European neighbours, along with the many other languages spoken in Europe. Mandarin, Russian, Portuguese and Arabic also provide a great deal of opportunity to open up new markets to Scotland. It's commonly said that you should be able to buy products in your own language and sell in the language of the customer. If children grow up learning only English and have a minimal grasp with another language, there is an entire world full of potential business markets that will close their door to Scotland as they have a choice of other countries willing to speak their language in order to trade with them. It's time for Scotland to look towards our European neighbours and the children who are brought up learning multiple languages from a young age.”

- “Due to China's booming economy, perhaps we should be introducing Chinese to the curriculum. This could be introduced nearer the end of primary, and carried on throughout secondary school.”
- “Chinese? Spanish? At Primary School level, it is good to start learning ANY and LOTS of languages, to embed a love for languages, then expertise can be gained later on.”

Conclusion

We welcome the intentions behind the Scottish Government's approach to increase foreign language learning in primary schools. The arguments for it have been well rehearsed and a consensus in favour appears to have formed across the sector. Implementing the approach will be harder given the complexity of the issue: funding; curriculum capacity; required teaching skills; changes to initial teacher education and the use of secondary teachers and visitors in the primary classroom. Given the consensus we hope that significant progress towards realising those ambitions can be realised.