

Submission from UK National Commission for UNESCO Scotland Committee to the Scottish Parliament European and External Relations Committee Inquiry on Learning Foreign Languages in Primary Schools

1. About United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

Founded in 1945 with the adoption of its constitution in the UK, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was created to respond to the belief of nations, forged by two world wars in less than a generation that political and economic agreements are not enough to build a lasting peace. Peace must be established on the basis of humanity's moral and intellectual solidarity.

UNESCO, as a UN Specialized Agency, contributes to peace and security by promoting collaboration among nations through education, culture, sciences, and communication. It now has the widest membership of any UN agency with 195 Member States. It works to create the conditions for dialogue among civilizations, cultures and peoples, based upon respect for commonly shared values. It is through this dialogue that the world can achieve global visions of sustainable development encompassing observance of human rights, mutual respect and the alleviation of poverty, all of which are at the heart of UNESCO'S mission and activities.

UNESCO has a strong commitment to quality education for all and linguistic diversity in Education (UNESCO, 2003a¹). As language issues are central to all fields in UNESCO's mandate, the Organization promotes an interdisciplinary approach to multilingualism and linguistic diversity involving all programme sectors: education, culture, science, communication and information and social and human sciences. Languages, with their complex implications for identity, communication, social integration, education and development, are of strategic importance for people and the planet.

There is growing awareness that languages play a vital role in development, in ensuring cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, but also in attaining quality education for all and strengthening cooperation, in building inclusive knowledge societies and preserving cultural heritage, and in mobilizing political will for applying the benefits of science and technology to sustainable development.

UNESCO's Constitution includes the maintenance and perpetuation of language diversity as a basic principle to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for human rights and

¹ UNESCO (2003a). *Education in a multilingual world*. UNESCO Education Position Paper. Paris: UNESCO. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001297/129728e.pdf>

fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world without distinction of race, sex, language, religion, by the Charter of the United Nations.

(UNESCO Constitution Article 1).

2. Responses to the Committee's Request for Views

The UKNC for UNESCO Scotland Committee welcomes the Inquiry on Learning Foreign Languages in Primary Schools. It supports the 1+2 language approach and the proposal to offer additional language learning from primary 1. The earlier a child becomes accustomed to hearing and speaking more than one language, the more natural it will be for him or her to regard language proficiency as a normal part of life (Royal Society of Edinburgh, 2006:Summary²).

This response is provided in relation to a selection of the questions posed by the Scottish Parliament European and External Relations Committee.

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

and

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

UNESCO encourages broad and international commitment to promoting multilingualism and linguistic diversity, including the safeguarding of endangered languages.

Language diversity is essential to the human heritage. Each and every language embodies the unique cultural wisdom of a people. The loss of any language is thus a loss for all humanity. (UNESCO 2003b³)

The UN has six working languages: Arabic; Chinese; English; French; Russian and Spanish. A number of different languages should continue to be offered in Scottish schools so young people have an understanding of the diversity of languages and the strong links between language learning and cultural understanding. Language

² Royal Society of Edinburgh (2006) *Languages in Scotland – What's the Problem?* Conference Report

³ UNESCO (2003b). *Language vitality and endangerment: By way of introduction*. UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Unit's Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages. Paris: UNESCO. http://portal.unesco.org/culture/admin/ev.php?URL_ID=9105&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201&reload=1087307727

can in itself be a medium for the passing on of traditions and cultural knowledge within a community. Language learning makes a contribution to children's ability to develop a broader sense of the world and a more global perspective. It is proficiency in more than one foreign language that will make the decisive difference in the future (European Commission, 2012:2)⁴.

The UKNC UNESCO Scotland Committee supports the inclusion of Gaelic as one of the languages included in the 1 + 2 approach to language learning. The teaching of language in primary schools can bring the added benefit of communicating the intangible cultural heritage that can be imbued in a language. For example, the Gaelic language has a strong oral tradition associated with it.

The EU communication *Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes* is accompanied by a staff working document entitled, *Language competences for employability, mobility and growth*⁵. It states that, 'Poor language skills are a serious obstacle to seizing professional opportunities abroad and in enterprises or organisations active at international level'. The 1 + 2 approach should 'value knowledge of other languages as a life skill that is, economically as well as culturally, vital to the success of Scotland and its people.' (Royal Society of Edinburgh, 2006:Summary⁶).

- **How do you think the Scottish Government's 1 + 2 proposal compares to other countries, European or otherwise?**

A European Survey on Language Competences⁷ (ESLC), carried out in 2011, assessed pupils' knowledge of the first and second foreign languages at the end of lower secondary education. The survey provided empirical evidence on the ability of young Europeans to communicate across borders, their attitudes, expectations and exposure to foreign languages, as well as teaching methods and approaches in this field. It should be noted that ESLC tested foreign language competences in England, not in the whole UK and a total of 16 education systems participated. The findings of the survey of these education systems indicated that on average only 4 in 10 pupils reach 'independent user' level in the first foreign language which means they are able to hold a simple conversation. Only one quarter attained this level in the second language. These findings show that other countries have similar challenges of improving young people's language competences. However, the findings of the survey also showed that there were considerable differences in Member States'

⁴ European Commission (2012) Commission Staff Working Document, *Language competences for employability, mobility and growth*, Strasbourg, 20.11.2012

⁵ European Commission (2012) Commission Staff Working Document, *Language competences for employability, mobility and growth*, Strasbourg, 20.11.2012

⁶ Royal Society of Edinburgh (2006) *Languages in Scotland – What's the Problem?* Conference Report

⁷ The European Survey on Language Competences was conducted in 2011. Its findings were published in June. <http://ec.europa.eu/languages/eslc/index.html>.

performance with over 80% of the pupils in some countries (Malta and Sweden) reaching the level of 'independent user' in their first foreign language.

The ESLC showed that the typical age for starting to learn the first foreign language is between 6 and 9 years, whereas the second foreign language generally becomes compulsory between 10 and 15. The introduction of the first foreign language in P1 and the second in the upper primary school in Scotland would be comparable with these findings.

Overall, the tendency in the EU-27 is to offer foreign language learning from an earlier age than previously. In primary education, the percentage of pupils learning a foreign language went up from 67.5% in 2004/2005 to 78.2% in 2009/2010. (European Commission, 2012)

- **How can we ensure that Scottish children are not disadvantaged in their career prospects due to a lack of skills in language compared to children from elsewhere?**

and

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

The 1 + 2 approach will not be successful unless it also tackles attitudes, motivation and confidence to learn a foreign language. Attitudes and motivation to learn another language is affected by a variety of factors but it is important that approaches to learning languages in the primary school take account of these factors. This means there is a need for innovative approaches to language learning and teaching. There is evidence to show that some pupils in Scotland were motivated to learn Chinese language because of an initial interest in Chinese culture and direct links with schools and teachers in China. This highlights the value of approaches to language learning that start with developing the pupils' curiosity about the country and culture. Further emphasis should be placed on the development of international links and contacts between pupils in Scotland and other countries with a focus on language learning and global citizenship as part of the 1 + 2 approach. More should be done to encourage primary schools to develop international links through programmes offered by British Council, EU and other organisations, as well as greater use of technology to connect schools.

Many of the approaches to teaching languages in the primary school advocated by the previous Modern Languages in the Primary School initiative (MLPS) remain

relevant (e.g. learning language through song, drama and film). These approaches should be enriched by the use of access to native speakers of the language. There are examples in Scottish schools of parents whose native language is not English being invited to the classroom. Podcasts, use of open-source educational resources and ICT-based learning should be used to supplement face-to-face classroom learning. The previous MLPS initiative was not sustainable which highlights the importance of putting in place combinations of different approaches of professional learning for teachers. This will require a blend of stronger emphasis on language learning at the undergraduate stage with innovative approaches to career-long professional learning. Career-long planning for teachers' professional learning in language development should be included in national, local authority, school and university discussions concerning the implementation of the recommendations of the *Teaching Scotland's Future Report* (Donaldson, 2011). Professional development will be important for teachers in primary school who do not have specialist knowledge in foreign language development to enable them to identify ways they can support language learning across the curriculum.

Some European countries have introduced Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) where non-language subjects are taught through the medium of a foreign language. Austria is an example where this approach is being developed. The first foreign language is used to teach one curricular subject one lesson per week to pupils aged 6 – 8 years (European Commission, 2012:14). This offers a way of intensifying language learning through a theme. It provides additional exposure and practice of the language for the pupils. Curriculum for Excellence is well suited to linking different areas of the curriculum through a learning theme. There are examples of interdisciplinary approaches in schools in Scotland but not necessarily using a Content and Language Integrated Approach. Lessons could be learned from CLIL approaches in other countries and integrated language approaches used in Gaelic medium education in Scotland.

Curriculum for Excellence aims to equip young people for life and work in a global society and to prepare them for a future Scotland. It emphasises the development of young people as global citizens through embedded and integrated whole school approaches. Similarly, language learning should be embedded through whole school approaches in the primary school from primary 1. Curriculum for Excellence already recognises the importance of language learning, however, the Modern Languages Experiences and Outcomes need to be extended to include Early and First levels.

Some classrooms in Scottish schools are already multilingual because of the pupils who have come to Scotland from other countries. UKNC for UNESCO Scotland Committee supports the continuation of the variety of mother tongues found within Scotland's school population. The 2 + 1 approach should continue to celebrate the variety of languages that children bring with them and encourage them to maintain

and develop their mother tongue. The presence of pupils speaking different languages in the classroom is an opportunity to stimulate awareness of the diversity of languages and motivate children to learn other languages. However, this situation is challenging for teachers and professional learning opportunities are needed to enable teachers who have no experience of working in a multilingual classroom to learn from peers with first-hand experience as well as from experts in the field of language learning.

UNESCO's approach to language and education in the twenty-first century is based on three principles⁸:

1.UNESCO supports mother tongue instruction as a means of improving educational quality by building upon the knowledge and experience of the learners and teachers.

2.UNESCO supports bilingual and/or multilingual education at all levels of education as a means of promoting both social and gender equality and as a key element of linguistically diverse societies.

3.UNESCO supports language as an essential component of inter-cultural education in order to encourage understanding between different population groups and ensure respect for fundamental rights.

⁸ UNESCO (2003a). *Education in a multilingual world*. UNESCO Education Position Paper. Paris: UNESCO. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001297/129728e.pdf>