

## **Submission from Dr Dan Tierney, Strathclyde University**

### **A briefing paper for the members of the European and External Relations Committee**

#### **Introduction**

I support the objectives of trying to improve the status of languages and I applaud the Minister for his support for language learning. However, I have serious concerns about the Languages Working Group Committee's Report and some of the "evidence" provided and I believe your committee is absolutely correct to probe and ensure that we get this right.

#### **The objectives**

It is unclear what we are trying to achieve here. We have the economic arguments mixed with the celebration of our diversity, our heritage languages and sign language. There is mention made of 15 languages. If the objective is *linguistic competence*, to be like our European competitors, then we need to go for one main language (5-16), plus one other. If the objective is to increase *language awareness* then we can go for the route of taster courses, an encounter with different languages. If the objective is *cultural awareness* then it can be any languages.

At times, immersion is mentioned and lessons drawn from research in Gaelic Medium or from the Walker Road French experiment in Aberdeen. The latter was stopped due to funding and it would be impossible to replicate Gaelic Medium Education across the entire country without major funding, therefore immersion is not relevant.

#### **Other countries**

If we look at a country like Spain, all children learn English from an early age and carry that through to High School. They are taught by primary teachers who have specialised in English at University. They can also be taught another language which may be e.g. Basque or Catalan, but again their teachers have the linguistic competence. In an English speaking country it is not so easy to identify which language the child will need in the future. Jamie McGrigor is right about "grasping the nettle".

#### **Existing problems**

The report recognises the gaps in provision at present in P6/ P7. These can be caused by teacher absence, pressure on the curriculum etc. It also recognises the significant problems of transition from primary to secondary with a "fresh start" approach often taken. It does not mention the problem of mismatch of languages but says it will be left to local clusters. Rather than sorting out the existing situation, it suggests going down to P1. At present with Modern Languages in Primary Schools we have one of 4 languages in P6 / P7, French, German, Italian or Spanish and there are significant problems of continuity. In the new set up, Kamal might learn

Spanish in Hamilton and then at P4, his mum might move to Wishaw where he attends a school where French is taught; Sonia might learn Italian in Glasgow throughout primary but her mum then chooses a placing request into East Renfrewshire where French is taught; Ms McPherson has a Higher Spanish and studies that at Aberdeen Univ. but her first school post is in a German school. You can imagine the problems when more languages come into play. Clare Adamson is right to question whether a Higher language will prepare the teacher. When it comes to concurrent degrees Chinese, Punjabi, Arabic, Russian and Portuguese are unlikely to be available.

### **“Younger is better”**

The research evidence is split on this. Some argue that the earlier the better, but others argue that older children are more efficient learners. Obviously, a 3 year old Polish child in Scotland will quickly pick up the language, but that is completely different from learning in a classroom. Mr Macaulay says that they “looked at a considerable body of research evidence” which supports an earlier start. I was unable to find **any** references in the report to support this and many of the major publications e.g. Burstall, Poole, Martin, Singleton, Sharpe, Van Parreren are missing. **My understanding of the research does not support a P1 start.**

### **Embedding**

This is where the class teacher drops a language naturally into the day rather than having a stand-alone lesson. This was proposed for P6 / P7 but Head teachers objected to the language teachers being “locked” in to P6/ P7, so in many cases they had to do a swap over of classes. For embedding to happen in the new model every teacher would need to be trained in a language.

### **Conclusion**

I would love to see a result where every child in Scotland was a competent speaker by age 15. I would also be happy if they learned about our diverse language communities. I would be delighted to see an improvement in languages in Scotland. Unfortunately, this report does not provide a clear plan as to how this ambitious agenda will be delivered. This is a complex issue, we have not reached the summit of the present mountain and yet we have set ourselves a higher mountain. I am fearful that a lot of money will be spent, without achieving what the Minister rightly wishes.

