



RESPONSE TO THE NATIONAL  
COUNCIL FOR CURRICULUM  
AND ASSESSMENT'S *DRAFT*  
*SPECIFICATION FOR JUNIOR CYCLE*  
*MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES*

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## Contents

Introduction	1
Rationale	1
Aims	1
Teaching and learning	2
Evaluation of outcomes	2
Other areas of concern	3
Conclusion	4
References	4

The Study of Languages, Literature, Culture and Communication Committee of the Royal Irish Academy /Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann, Ireland's leading body of experts in the sciences, humanities and social sciences, welcomes the opportunity to respond to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's (NCCA) *Draft Specification for Junior Cycle Modern Foreign Languages* (March 2016). The views expressed in this response are not necessarily shared by each individual member of the Academy.

## Introduction

The Draft Specification for Junior Cycle Modern Foreign Languages (March 2016) has been underpinned by broad consultation and research, and, as such, constitutes a fine example of good practice in the field. The excellent *Draft Background Paper* and *Brief for the Review of Junior Cycle Modern Foreign Languages* (June 2015) charts the context for the development of the specification, presents an overview of the existing curriculum and examinations format and analyses the relationship between the current syllabus and assessment practices. It outlines significant developments in applied linguistics at European and national level, the student classroom experience, performance at Junior Certificate examinations, and necessary criteria for language vitality and language diversity. Finally, it sets out the brief for the elaboration of the specification.

## Rationale

In examining several papers and discussions regarding language teaching and learning in Ireland, the Background Paper found that there was broad agreement on the changes which needed to be made to modern foreign language (MFL) provision:

*Recurrent themes are: the need for an overarching national policy for languages; the need for diversification of languages on offer and greater choice for students; the critical importance of teacher education; the need for an improved, integrated learning experience for students; assessment methods, aligned to the CEFR [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages], which will reinforce best practice in teaching and learning. (p. 35)*

These requirements have, for the most part, been addressed in the Draft Specification, which centres on three strands: (1) Communicative Competence (2) Language Awareness (3) Sociocultural Knowledge and Intercultural Awareness. These strands are well thought out and allow for a focus on the classroom itself and the cultures therein, the cultures associated with the L3/L4, in addition to the more obvious goal of communicative competence.

## Aims

The *Draft Specification* sets out the foundation for competence in the five language skills, enjoyment of (and therefore motivation for) language learning, and consequent preparation for lifelong language learning, learner autonomy, intercultural competence and transferable skills.

## Teaching and learning

The following changes are particularly laudable:

- The integrated nature of the *Draft Specification*
- The change of focus from the examinations and rote learning to more collaborative teaching and learning
- The inclusive nature of the *Draft Specification*, which aims to foster language learning among students across the entire spectrum of ability, and to valorise the heritage/home languages of the classroom
- The introduction of Mandarin Chinese
- The inclusion of general specifications for the introduction of new languages
- Learner outcomes and competence broadly defined by the CEFR
- The proposed student portfolio, whose aim is to foster reflective learning, language awareness and learner autonomy
- Examples of student work as concrete illustrations of learner outcomes
- The possibility of the introduction of languages of the classroom in the form of 'short courses', which could enhance language awareness and intercultural competence, thus tying in with many of the 24 statements central to the programme

## Evaluation of outcomes

Effective teaching requires effective assessment. Research\* has shown that approximately 30% of classroom time in language teaching is devoted to assessment, and another 30% of teacher work time outside of the classroom is also taken up with assessment. In the *Draft Specification* there is a strong focus on formative assessment, which is appropriate. There will be two Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs), an Assessment Task (AT) linked to the second CBA and a Final Examination. The CBAs will focus on oral communication and selected texts from the student portfolio. The AT will take the form of a written task related to the second CBA and will be sent to the State Examinations Commission for marking. It will comprise 10% of the total marks available for the Final Examination. The Final Examination, which is offered at a Common Level, focuses on assessment of 'reading/engaging with texts'.

The authors of the 'Response' have some concerns in relation to the proposed scheduling of the assessments, which does not vary enormously from practice heretofore, and could result in the kinds of teaching to the test and rote learning (negative washback) which the reforms purport to avoid. An additional concern is that much of the detail on assessment, in particular the Assessment Toolkit, which is described as 'an essential element of quality assurance' and which will contain 'the suggested format for written pieces, the formation and duration of oral pieces, and the process of Subject Learning and Assessment Review involved', is not yet available.

The *Junior Cycle Modern Foreign Languages Consultation Report* by NCCA November 2015 states that almost half of students surveyed were of the view that oral assessment should be external (p. 16), something which is crucial to their confidence in the system. Furthermore, although several references are made to the fact that the Final Examination will be external, there is no indication as to how this will be administered and no reference to an external examiner. In the absence of such formalised objectivity, it is difficult to judge to what extent assessment practices will be an indicator of quality. Consequently, the *Draft Specification* is incomplete.

## Other areas of concern

It would appear from the Twenty-four Statements of Learning published in the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015) (p. 12) by the Department of Education and Skills that foreign-language learning will become compulsory in the Junior Cycle. This is a welcome development. However, the NCCA document *Towards a Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015) states that [only] 'One element of requirement will apply. To obtain the junior cycle qualification (Level 3) students will have to study and present evidence of learning in English, Irish and Mathematics.' <http://ncca.ie/framework/faq.htm>. This position should be clarified. The recommendation in the Royal Irish Academy's *National Languages Strategy* (2011) is that, at post-primary level, 'advanced proficiency in a third language be made a universal requirement in order to integrate plurilingualism into the curriculum.' (p. 15)

A body of teachers who are both linguistically and pedagogically competent will be necessary for the effective implementation of the *Draft Specification for Junior Cycle Modern Foreign Languages*. The Teaching Council currently requires that teachers provide evidence, either from a university department head or from an external examining body, of Level B2.2 of the CEFR in the relevant MFL. In most cases, university department heads are confirming that their graduates have attained the required level. This is both unsatisfactory and untenable. A language degree is currently an indication of academic achievement, not of a particular level of language proficiency. In the absence of evidential proof of a proficiency level of B2.2, the likelihood is that many graduates will enter the teaching profession without the language competence needed to function satisfactorily. Moreover, based on the information provided on assessment in the *Draft Specification*, it is difficult to judge how a teacher with poor levels of language proficiency could effectively assess students' language ability. An additional concern is that assessment training and portfolio assessment training are largely absent from current Initial Teacher Education programmes.

Validation of language-teacher competence could be addressed by the introduction of a compulsory standardised national language competency examination at level B2.2 for all students intending to apply for courses leading to a Professional Master of Education (PME) qualification. Current practice could further be improved by the addition of modules in applied linguistics (including assessment) in PME programmes.

As has already been stated, the *Draft Specification* encourages an integrated approach to language learning. This, too, has implications for Initial Teacher Education programmes, which rarely include language-awareness courses, even for prospective language teachers. The integration of technology is a worthy aspiration. However, there is no indication in the *Draft Specification* as to how this is to be achieved. If we agree that language learning is a sociocultural process, which views reading, writing, speaking and listening as situated, goal-oriented activities intimately tied to their contexts, then, to paraphrase Hafner et al., participation in a range of digital contexts such as Facebook, YouTube, etc. both mediates and transforms that process.

Since the introduction of the first communicative foreign-language syllabus, learners have, in some instances, consistently been taught items of vocabulary which are not compatible with the standard form of the target languages and which are also taken up by writers of textbooks. This is at variance with good practice in language teaching. In keeping with this recent tradition, a number of errors and incidences of inappropriate register appear in the appendix entitled 'The Development of Modern Foreign Language Exponents'. These should be reviewed by native speakers.

## Conclusion

Notwithstanding the serious concerns highlighted above, which must be addressed as a matter of priority, particularly in relation to assessment and teacher training, the *Draft Specification* provides for an exciting and inclusive syllabus, tailored to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse, multilingual and multicultural population. While it does not by any means obviate the need for a comprehensive languages in education policy, it is an important first step in addressing the issues raised time and again by various professional bodies concerned about Ireland's foreign languages deficit.

The *Background Paper* refers to the fundamentals necessary for preserving linguistic vitality and linguistic diversity as proposed by Baetens-Beardsmore: '[...] the capacity to use a given language, the opportunity to use it and the desire to use it'.\*\* If the ambition to link learning objectives closely to appropriate, objective assessment is realised, the instructions for classroom practice and methodologies followed, and the flexibility for additional courses fully exploited, then both the students' experience of language learning and their competence in the L3 should improve accordingly.

## References

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\* Extract from address to the European Parliament by Hugo Baetens-Beardsmore, citing F. Grin and T. Moring, *Support for Minority Languages in Europe* (European Commission, 2008), 5, cited in National Council for Curriculum Assessment, *Draft Background Paper and Brief for the Review of Junior Cycle Modern Foreign Languages*, June 2015

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