

## **French admit "English deficit" needs attention**

"Do you speak English?" ask the advertisements for a private language school all over the Paris Metro. "Not yet, but ask me in a year or two," might be the answer if the French government has its way. Fearful of losing influence, not to mention business, in an increasingly anglophone world, French children are to be given "intensive" extra-curricular English lessons during the school holidays.

The country's education minister said that not speaking English was a "handicap" and declared this month: "French youngsters must be bilingual by the time they finish school." He said that the French president had given him a mission to "make France a bilingual nation", and that his proposals redressed a social imbalance.

"Well-off families pay for study sessions abroad. I'm offering them to everyone right here," he said. The reform has provoked a mixed reaction in France where previous attempts to make youngsters more fluent in English have largely failed.

An education expert said France had woken up to weaknesses in its language teaching. "Ten years ago people said France's education system was the best in the world and that it didn't need to be changed at all," he said. "Now there is a realisation that something has to be done because France is falling behind other countries."

Until now France has seemed more concerned about protecting its own language than promoting another. In 1994, legislation forced radio stations to ensure at least 40% of music output was French, and fines were imposed on public bodies using anglicisms. A few years ago the then French president Jacques Chirac stormed out of an EU summit meeting when a French business leader addressed delegates in English. Chirac said he was "deeply shocked".

Now the minister wants pupils at French *lycées* — secondary schools — to enrol on three weeks of free "intensive" courses in English during the February and summer holidays. In addition, all *collèges* (middle schools) and *lycées* with low academic achievements have been instructed to offer pupils two hours of extra "support lessons" a week, including English. The government plans to encourage what it calls "e-learning" by offering English courses on the internet.

The extra-curricular courses are voluntary. *Lycéens* will be invited to apply for places soon. Lessons will concentrate on oral English, a fundamental change, as most of France's official examinations are written tests. Classes will be taught either by teachers who volunteer to work during the holidays in return for tax-free overtime or by English students from abroad. These holiday English courses are part of a package of education reforms — including the ending of traditional Saturday lessons in most schools — announced recently by the minister.

It is not the first time a French government has tried to close the language gap. In 1989 the education minister, Lionel Jospin, made mandatory two to three hours of English a week for nine- to 11-year-olds. Later legislation introduced 15 minutes a day of English for pupils from six years old. In 2004 a cross-party parliamentary commission recommended — without success — that English should be mandatory in all schools and given the same importance as the French language and mathematics.

An education expert said that the new measures stand a better chance of success than previous reforms. "The world has changed and France has realised it has to change with it. More and more students are spending a year studying in an anglophone country. They realise it looks good on their CV that they can speak English," he added.

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