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| Description | French Education Minister Xavier Darcos has announced plans to offer free English classes in schools, saying that speaking fluent English was the key to success. | | |

French schools to offer free English lessons

Minister says poor English a handicap in international business

PARIS: French Education Minister Xavier Darcos has announced plans to offer free English classes in schools, saying that speaking fluent English was the key to success.

The policy marks a break from the traditional Gallic strategy of promoting the French language, BBC News and Britain's Daily Mail reported.

Mr Darcos was quoted by French news channel France24 as saying that starting next year, French schools would offer intensive, week-long workshops in spoken English, on top of foreign language lessons already in the curriculum.

The schools would also place additional emphasis on English studies as an extra-curricular activity, he said on France's TF1 television on Monday.

The initiatives, which would be offered free after normal school hours, would be implemented in all secondary schools, 4,000 primary schools and 200 colleges.

Mr Darcos said poor English was now a "handicap" because all international business is conducted in the language.

So he wanted to make it easier for all French students to learn English, saying that "while well-off families pay for study sessions abroad, I'm offering them to everyone right here".

President Nicolas Sarkozy, a self-confessed Anglophile, is likely to back the plan, according to BBC.

The new emphasis on English is a far cry from the founding principles of the French Republic, which has historically seen alternatives to the national language as tantamount to an attack on its very identity, said the Daily Mail.

It noted that L'Academie Francaise, set up in 1635 to protect the purity of French, has hit out at the increasing usage of "Franglais" words such as "le weekend" and "le parking", as well as the unhealthy influence of Hollywood films on Gallic culture.

Two years ago, then French president Jacques Chirac stormed out of a European Union summit in protest when a French business leader addressed delegates in English.

The Mail said the French have been particularly unhappy about the spread of English, seeing it as synonymous with tough capitalist values, as opposed to the more socialist-leaning ones favoured in modern France.

French used to be the lingua franca for most business in the European Union. However, with the expansion of the bloc to 27 member states, the majority of which prefer English to French, the former has become dominant by far.

And with Mr Sarkozy at the helm, France's new English-friendly education policy is not altogether unexpected.

Mr Sarkozy does not speak much English, noted the Mail, but is pro-US and counts Englishmen such as former premier Tony Blair as personal friends.

He has already infuriated traditionalists by suggesting that the French should no longer insist on speaking their own language at international negotiations.

His wife, pop star Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, chose to sing in English on her latest CD.

A spokesman for L'Academie Francaise said there would be "no specific comment" concerning ministerial pronouncements, the Mail reported.

However, the main teaching union in France has criticised the Education Minister's plans, said BBC.

It cited the Snes-FSU union leader Roland Hubert as saying Mr Darcos should be concentrating on what happens during school time, not after it.