

Towards a National Policy for Languages in Education. The case of Ireland

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is twofold: firstly to present an approach to the development of national policies for foreign languages in education and, secondly, to apply this framework to the situation regarding languages in education in Ireland.

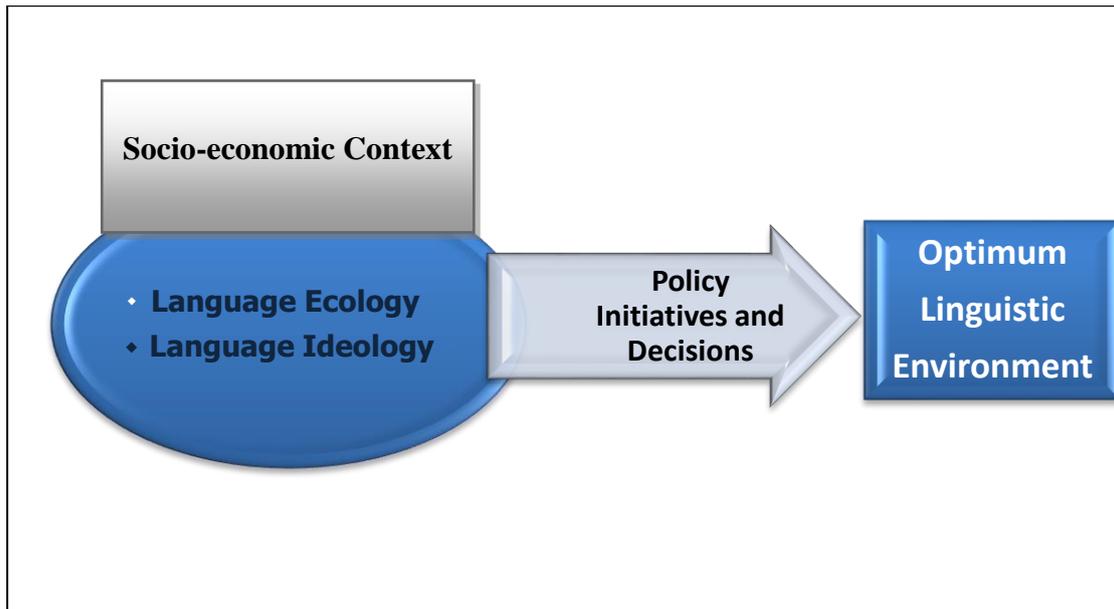
Language policy, itself, is a relatively new and interdisciplinary field whose literature contains a variety of terms to refer to attempts to influence or change language behaviour and/or attitudes towards languages. Two of the most frequently used are *language policy* and *language planning*. Others include *language engineering*, *language management* and *language revival*. One of the reasons for the proliferation of terms is the fact that the term *language policy* has in the past been associated with notions of control and attempts to shape linguistic environments for political purposes which did not necessarily have the best interests of the individual citizens and societies at heart (Ricento, 2000; Johnson, 2009; Shohamy, 2009). Therefore, researchers have been attempting to come up with alternatives which incorporate the attitudes of individual citizens towards language policy initiatives as well as the initiatives themselves. This change is reflective of a general shift in language policy research towards an understanding of how individuals engage with language policy issues (King and de Fina, 2010).

In this vein, Spolsky (2004) posits a three-dimensional model of language policy comprising its language practices, its language beliefs or ideology and any attempts to modify or influence that practice by any kind of language intervention, planning or management. Many researchers (e.g. Walsh, 2012) support Spolsky's view that, a consideration of both the *ecology*, or the use of languages, and the *ideology* of language, or what people believe about languages, can enrich understanding of a linguistic environment. Spolsky continues in a later work to develop the third dimension of his original module, i.e. attempts to modify or influence language practice, under the heading of *language management* (Spolsky, 2009), a term he prefers to *language planning*. In Spolsky's view, the goal of the theory of language policy is to account for the linguistic choices made by individuals. This paper further argues that an additional goal of language policy should be to understand linguistic choices and their interaction with institutional policy making in a particular socio-economic context in order to begin to identify and create a desired linguistic environment.

McDonnell and Elmore (1987: 133) describe policy initiatives as 'mechanisms capable of translating substantive policy goals into concrete actions'. Furthermore, if we view policies as instruments and initiatives capable of moving us from where we are to where we would like to be, then the following model can apply (Figure 1). According to this model, in order to identify the policies to implement, we must first have both a clear picture of where we currently stand and a vision for the future. Our understanding of our current position should relate to the actual use of languages

(language ecology), attitudes towards languages (language ideology) and the prevailing socio-economic context. While researchers in this field have long recognised the need to consider the social context (e.g. Cooper, 1989, Spolsky, 2004), the significance of the broader economic context is a more recent entrant to the debate.

Figure 1: Towards a National Policy for Foreign Languages in Education



Language Ecology

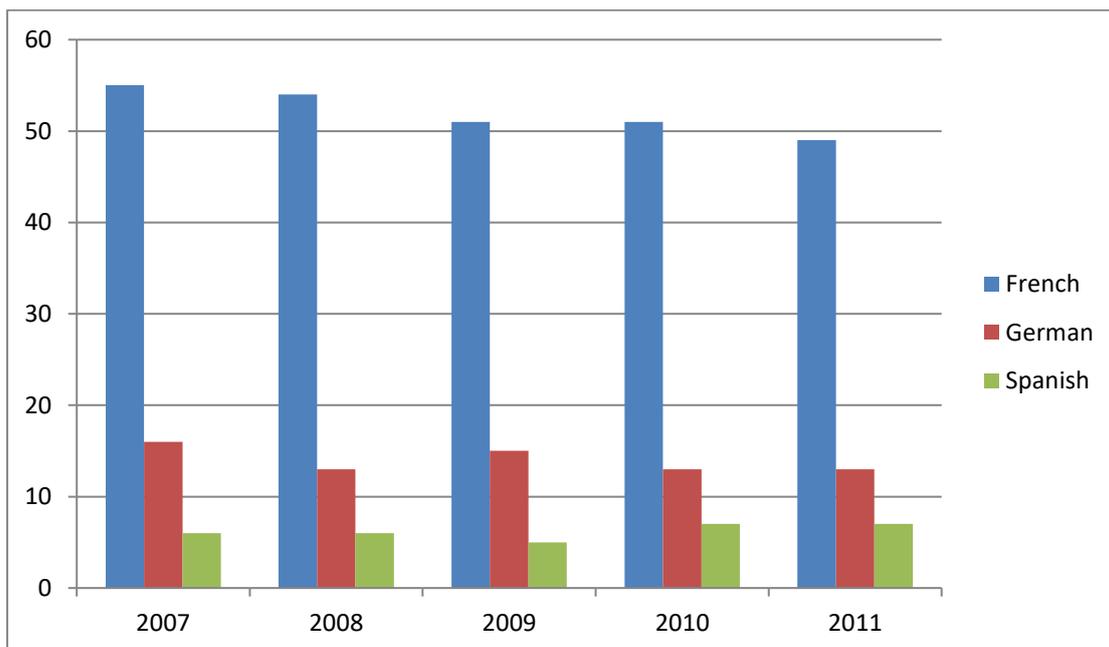
The languages spoken and learned in Ireland are a result of several factors, firstly, the influence of British rule, secondly, decisions made on the gaining of independence in the early years of the twentieth century, and thirdly the immigration of speakers of other languages into Ireland in recent decades (Council of Europe, 2008) and particularly since the enlargement of the EU in 2004. Article 8 of the Irish Constitution states that Irish is the first official language. The English language, the mother tongue of the great majority of those living in Ireland, is recognised as a second official language. In addition, the languages spoken on a significant scale by immigrants into Ireland include Chinese, Polish, Lithuanian, Romanian, Vietnamese, Yoruba, Albanian, Moldovan, Arabic and Russian.

Ireland does not have a holistic or integrated policy for foreign languages in education. However, elements of a policy exist in that Irish is compulsory in primary and secondary education while English is compulsory until the end of the Junior cycle of secondary level education (approximately until the age of 16). Foreign languages are not compulsory at any stage in the education system although the majority of secondary schools provide their students with the option of studying at least one foreign language (RIA, 2011).

For example, modern foreign languages are taught in the final two years of about 15 per cent of Irish primary schools (ages 5-12). At second level (ages 13-18 approximately), French accounts for about 70 per cent of all foreign-language teaching with German and Spanish the other major languages offered.

In 2011, approximately 27,000, or 50% of candidates, took French in the final examination at second level, the Leaving Certificate (Figure 2). This represented a drop of 1,000 students on the figures for 2007-10. The figures for German remained relatively stable during this period at between 6% and 7% with between 5% and 6% sitting Spanish between 2007 and 2009, increasing to approximately 7% in 2010 and 2011. 400 of the Leaving Certificate candidates took Italian constituting approximately 1% of the total number of candidates with Russian and Japanese also offered in a small number of schools (less than 1%). In addition, Arabic is offered albeit in a form primarily aimed at native speakers of the language.

Figure 2: Percentage of Candidates taking French, German and Spanish in the Irish Leaving Certificate between 2007 and 2011



Source: State Examinations Commission (2012), Condon (2012)

At third level, there are seven Universities in Ireland each of them autonomous, self-governing institutions. In addition, there are 16 Institutes of Technology and five colleges of education. Although there are figures available for those studying modern foreign languages as a full degree or as a major option (approximately 1,600 enrolments in 2009-10 (Condon, 2012)), the situation is less clear regarding those taking languages for less than 50% of their credits or as an extracurricular activity. This is partly owing to a lack of institutional policies concerning which languages should be offered at which level/s on which programmes which results in a somewhat

ad-hoc approach to the inclusion and/or removal of language and/or supports for language learning on non-specialist programmes in particular (Bruen, 2004). However, it does appear that in 2010, for example, approximately 5,000, i.e. 3%, of students were enrolled on programmes with a foreign language-component (Flynn, 2011).

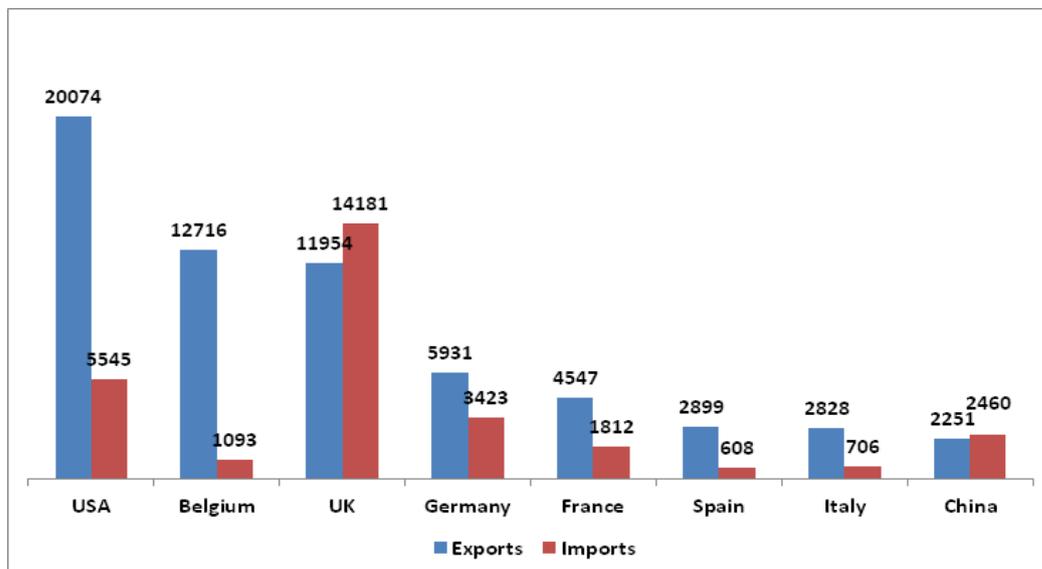
The languages most commonly offered at third level are French, German, Spanish and Italian. In addition, in recent years, Japanese and Chinese have become more popular, often at beginners level, although these years have also been particularly difficult for University language departments, in general, with a decline in the percentage of students choosing to study a modern foreign language. Nevertheless, although the numbers studying French have fallen, it is still the most popular choice. There has been a similar drop in the numbers studying German and an increase in the numbers studying Spanish. (Council of Europe, 2008a).

Finally, of note is the fact that a pass grade in a modern foreign or a classical language is a requirement for entry to study in the National University of Ireland (comprising four of the seven Universities referred to above). Given that the study of foreign languages is optional, this requirement is almost certainly an important factor in the up-take of languages at second level and their retention in secondary schools (RIA, 2011).

Socio-economic Context

Ireland is a small and ‘highly open’ (Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), 2012) economy and is as such highly dependent on its exports for economic growth with its trading partners including Belgium, Germany, France, Spain, Italy and China (Diagram 3). For example, the value of internationally traded goods and services in 2011 amounted to 190% of GDP or €156 billion (ESRI 2012).

Figure 3: Ireland’s trading partners (2011) (€m) (Donohue 2012. Used with permission.)



In addition, Ireland has been a member of the EU since 1973 and officially recognises the importance of linguistic diversity and multilingualism deeply embedded in the European treaties as well accepting, in principle at least, that every person in every member state should be able to speak two foreign languages in addition to their mother tongue (European Commission, 2011).

However, several recent surveys conducted in Ireland, for example, by the *Irish Business and Employers' Confederation* (IBEC), suggest that a lack of linguistic skills is hampering the recovery of the Irish economy and in particular, the export sector. For example, according to Donohue (2012), Head of Social and Education Policy at IBEC, 40% of recruiters highlight the importance of language and communication skills as language and cultural barriers represent important obstacles for SMEs in their drive to increase their exports. While he accepted that English may operate as a lingua franca, the need for the 'competitive edge' achieved through language knowledge remains. Such evidence is supported by research findings in the emerging field of language economics which recognises language competence as one of a range of factors that can maximise profit for firms (see for example Grin, Sfreddo and Vaillancourt, 2010).

In addition, according to Condon (2012), language skills are a prerequisite for many vacancies, particularly in sales and customer care activities, but also at professional level, for example in the fields of ICT, engineering, and finance with a variety of languages in demand, predominantly German, French and the Nordic languages. Similarly, the Irish Development Authority reported recently (IDA, 2012) that a large number of foreign direct investment companies in Ireland are indicating considerable demand for multilinguists.

Furthermore, the reports of the Irish *Expert Group for Future Skills Needs*, a steering group of the project *Key Skills for Enterprise to Trade Internationally*, tasked with advising the Irish government on future skills requirements that impact on enterprise and employment growth, are frequently dominated by discussion of the demand for languages in Ireland by SMEs or multinational corporations and the lack of graduates with language skills (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs: Statement of activity, 2012). Additional findings by this group include the fact that companies have stopped advertising in the Irish media as they cannot get graduates with language skills. Instead, the trend is towards the recruitment and training of native speakers with the disadvantage, however, that many do not stay in Ireland long term.

These findings echo reports emerging at EU level such as that produced by the thematic working group set up in 2010 with government representatives from across Europe, entitled *Languages for Jobs – providing multilingual communication skills for the labour market* (Thematic Network Group: Languages for Jobs (2011)) which stress in particular the fact that the demand for languages and communication skills is steadily rising on the European labour market (2011: 5) resulting in an urgent need for language teaching which is practically oriented, applied to professional contexts and accessible to all age and professional groups.

Language ideology

According to the Language Education Policy Profile completed by the Council of Europe (2008a: 42):

‘Those involved with the various bodies concerned with language learning in Ireland are already convinced of the value of learning another language, that on a personal level it opens up the mind to new cultures and ways of thinking and equips the learner with transferable skills; that on a professional level speaking another language gives people opportunities they might otherwise not have had including improving the mobility prospects of those who might choose to work or study abroad; that from a national point of view proficiency in languages is vital for maintaining national competitiveness and economic growth in this increasingly globalised society.

In addition, according to a recent Eurobarometer survey (European Commission, 2012a), there has been an increase in the number of people perceiving language skills as being very useful with 88% of Europeans expressing this view, an increase of 7% on the previous study conducted in 2005 (European Commission 2006), with 98% agreeing that mastery of an additional foreign language would be advantageous to their children. However, an expressed belief in the value of language learning does not necessarily translate into the actual acquisition of additional languages by the population, an argument is borne out by the finding that, while, in general, smaller member states exhibit higher levels of multilingualism, Ireland is one of the five countries in which respondents are least likely to speak a foreign language with 60% of those surveyed in Ireland expressing this view, the other countries being Hungary (65%), Italy (62%), the U.K. (61%) and Portugal (61%).

The primary reasons cited by the Irish respondents to this survey for not learning additional languages were lack of motivation (33%) and lack of time (27%). Other factors discouraging language learning included cost (21%) and a perceived lack of aptitude on the part of the respondent (19%).

With regard to broader questions relating to language policy in the above survey, 76% of those questioned in Ireland believe that language teaching should be a political priority (compared with an EU average of 77%), with 28% ‘totally agreeing’ and 54% ‘tending to agree’ that everyone should be able to communicate in one language other than their mother tongue. 56% supported the EU goal of an ability to communicate in two languages other than their mother tongue.

Regarding employers’ views, in particular, one in three questioned regarding the extent to which language skills play a role in recruitment in 2012 (Figure 4) indicated that such skills were either very (7%) or somewhat (25%) important. In European terms, however, the level of importance placed on language, while significant, is comparatively low.

Figure 4: The importance of language competence when recruiting graduates (Donohue 2012. Used with permission.)



Finally with regard to third level students, it appears that foreign languages do not have a particularly positive image. According to the Council of Europe (2008a: 30), University language departments in Ireland do not always attract the best students nor those who have already acquired a high level of competence in the foreign language in question.

Moving to the political establishment in Ireland, some initial insights can be obtained by considering language policy discourse in the form of responses by the current Minister for Education, Ruairí Quinn TD, to relevant questions in the *Dáil*, the Irish Parliament. The first, given on the 25th May 2011 (Flynn, 2011) concerned the possible removal of the foreign language requirement for those wishing to study in four of the seven universities in Ireland while the second, given on the 11 January 2012 (*Dáil Eireann Debate Vol.751, No.1*), relates to the recent abolition in the national budget of 2012 of a pilot programme promoting the teaching of modern languages in the final two years of primary schools. The responses to these particular questions were chosen as they are reflective of government responses regarding contemporary issues around the teaching and learning of languages.

With regard to the foreign language requirement for entry to university, the Minister expressed the view that the language requirement may need reconsideration in the light of the economic imperative to encourage more students to study the physical sciences. He also hinted at changes in languages policies in secondary schools with a stronger emphasis on Chinese and Russian which are seen as key to economic growth. He has also ruled out the introduction of mandatory foreign languages at primary level giving ‘the heavy additional costs involved’ and ‘the already crowded primary school curriculum’ as reasons for this decision.

In his *Dáil* response, Mr Quinn also stated that he was ‘aware of the importance of promoting competence in a range of languages to support business and employment opportunities in Ireland and abroad,’ adding however, that ‘...there are a range of factors which must be considered in future decisions on language education at different levels and in the context of national economic and social priorities.’ He also said he was ‘aware of the demand for expansion of the range of languages on offer in post primary schools, particularly with regard to Mandarin and Polish’ cautioning however that budget cuts may make it difficult to widen the language options available in schools. Mr Quinn stated that his priority was to build stronger literacy and numeracy skills.

The Minister’s response to the question suggests an acceptance in principle of the importance of language learning but reluctance in practice to prioritise and fund it. This mirrors the findings of the Eurobarometer survey discussed above (European Commission, 2012) which indicates that the majority of Irish people describe the acquisition of additional languages as both valuable and important but are not themselves as individuals particularly motivated in this regard. This reflects a failure to move in the direction of what Bonachina-Pugh (2012) describes as a “practiced language policy” perhaps as a result of a lack of understanding of the truly negative impact of monolingualism on the individual, on Irish society and on the Irish economy, as well as the “widespread but erroneous perception” (RIA, 2011: 6) that English is enough.

This point is further borne out in the ministerial response to the second question referred to above. Here the Minister was responding to a decision to abolish the Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative at the end of the 2011-12 school year arguing that the savings would go towards the cost of implementing the new National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.

The value of language learning is nonetheless accepted in the latter half of the Minister’s response in which he refers to secondary, or post-primary, level stating that ‘participation in foreign languages [...] remains high’ and continues:

‘The vast majority of students are studying two languages and are therefore developing core skills which will serve them well in future language learning over their lifespan, and there are many opportunities outside the second level system for people to resume language learning.’

Thus, the previous sections have attempted to clarify the situation with regard to foreign languages in education in Ireland. The following sections attempt to derive from this profile a desired linguistic environment and to determine the types of initiatives likely to assist in achieving it.

Foreign language policy initiatives

Given the benefits of plurilingualism at a personal and professional level and of multilingualism nationally and internationally, it is clear that if Ireland is to advance both socially and economically and to continue to value EU membership, the ideal linguistic situation is one where a reasonable level of competence in at least one

foreign language competence is taken for granted and fostered at every stage of the education system.

However, as discussed above, foreign languages are not currently compulsory at any stage in the Irish education system, the only country in a similar situation in the EU being Scotland (RIA, 2011) with the result that the up-take can be particularly low and the progression through the various levels in the education system lacking in coherence. It would, therefore, be beneficial to the promotion of pluri- and multilingualism in Ireland to institute a number of reforms at primary, secondary and tertiary level:

At primary level (ages 5-12), it is recommended that the Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative be reintroduced and mainstreamed to include all primary schools. Such a decision would mirror recent proposals in the UK to make learning a foreign language compulsory from the age of seven in England's primary schools (BBC News 2012). Similarly, at second level (ages 13-18), the study of one foreign language should be compulsory to Leaving Certificate level and the requirement for passing grade in one foreign language should be retained for university entry. In this way, it could be ensured that foreign languages are prioritised at second level. In universities and Institutes of Technology, in line with the recommendations of the European Network for the Promotion of Language Learning Among All Undergraduates (ENLU, 2005) a requirement that there be a foreign language component to all undergraduate university degrees, and one to which a number of credits are attached, would have a similar impact. Elements of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), in which content is taught through a foreign language, and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) could, for example, be utilised as integral components in university degrees in order to develop language learning skills and avoid curricular overload. In order to facilitate the implementation of this initiative in practice, all third level institutions should be required to draft their own Foreign Language policy (see also RIA, 2011) bearing in mind the need for institutional coherence and a response to national needs, while at the same time respecting the notion of institutional autonomy.

In order to ensure coherence and a smooth transition across levels, the standard reached by the end of each stage in the education system should also be evaluated using an appropriate framework such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)(Council of Europe, 2001). The use of appropriate language learning tools capable of supporting the CEFR such as the European Language Portfolio (Council of Europe, 2011), versions of which have been designed for primary and secondary pupils as well as for third-level students, could effectively support this process (National Centre for Languages, 2012).

In addition, discussions in the previous section indicate that, at the level of educational policy-making in Ireland, the teaching and learning of additional languages is being pitted against the promotion of literacy and numeracy. However, research in the field of language acquisition has repeatedly demonstrated the value of learning an additional language in terms of improving overall metacognitive awareness, literacy and communication skills (Sherry and Curry, 2005). Therefore, it is recommended that pupils and students be allowed to benefit from a more holistic approach to curriculum design at all levels within the Irish education system which

recognises the transferable skills inherent in the study of additional languages, such as the development of language awareness, and oral and written communication skills (Bruen, 2008).

The support of primary school teachers would be a key factor in the success of such an initiative given “the crucial role that teachers play in the enactment of language policy” (Farrell and Kun 2008: 399; Shohamy, 2009) and as such appropriate training and an awareness raising campaign specifically targeting the teaching profession is also recommended.

It is also key that the information flow regarding the supply of and demand for language competencies in the labour market be improved (RIA, 2011). This can only be achieved by an improvement in the data capturing and reporting mechanisms at third level in the education system as well as at industry level so that information is readily accessible regarding the numbers studying languages both as a core degree and as a component of a degree (Donohue, 2012) with the levels achieved in both of these scenarios again calibrated with reference to the CEFR in order to enhance vertical coherence. It is also imperative that this information be widely disseminated to those in a position to influence the career choices of the next generation, for example, career guidance counsellors at second level.

In order to combat the view that language learning is inherently difficult, and in particular, difficult to score well in at Leaving Certificate level, new and progressive teaching methods designed to motivate the language learner are also to be encouraged. These include those designed to give increased autonomy to the learner in the selection of materials and learning goals as well as those more eclectic methods capable of playing to the strengths associated with the range of learning styles to be found among any group of learners (Kelly, 2012). An increase in learner mobility including in particular student exchanges is also to be viewed in this context. Emerging technologies, attractive to a new generation of language learner should also be harnessed to enhance the quality and delivery of language teaching. One of many examples of good practice in this domain is that of Loftus, Springer and Zhang (2012) which concerns the use of mobile phone technology in the creation of short foreign language films as an integral part of an undergraduate language degree at one of the Higher Education Institutions in Ireland.

Finally, as we have seen, beliefs about language are sometimes based on myths or subjective positions without factual basis with one such position, for example prevalent in Ireland today being that while learning an additional language is a nice idea in theory, in practice, ‘English is enough’. In order to combat this view and similarly the view prevalent among the population at large including parents and politicians that languages are difficult to learn and difficult to perform well in in examinations, a language awareness campaign is required at a national level in order

to convince those with the power to control the national budget as well as those in a position to influence the next generation in their career choices of the value of the acquisition of an additional language at a personal, social and economic level (RIA, 2011).

In other words, such a campaign would need to ‘...convey the message that the economic, cultural and European future of Ireland depends on the valorisation of plurilingualism’ (Council of Europe (2008a: 51). Such a campaign would probably have most impact if created using case-studies of both individuals and enterprises and requires input from applied linguistics research findings and researchers (Johnson, 2009). For example, information regarding the findings of a survey currently being conducted by the European Commission (2012b) with the objective of identifying language ‘influencers’ or those responsible for motivating or inspiring individuals to take up a language initially could be invaluable in focusing such a campaign. Possible influencers identified by the Commission include the school system in general, parents, grandparents, teachers, university tutors and careers advisors.

The possibility of securing funding for a campaign of this nature under an EU initiative such as ET20 should be considered given the difficulties at present involved in obtaining national funding. Lobby groups, such as in Ireland the *One Voice for Languages* group which currently (June, 2012) has 94 members from five of the seven Irish universities and three of the Institutes of Technology as well as the representatives from the Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative and Enterprise Ireland (referred to above) are pivotal in changing public perceptions regarding the need for language and intercultural competencies among the Irish population.

An integrated national languages policy, something which has been repeatedly called for by language professionals in Ireland as well as by the European Commission would assist in maintaining an overview of such changes.

Conclusion

All language planning activities, and indeed discussions around language policy cannot be realistically divorced from the linguistic and socio-economic settings in which countries find themselves. An in-depth understanding of such an environment is a pre-requisite for the development of a national Languages in Education policy. It provides a basis for determining the optimum linguistic environment and for the identification of the initiatives and policy decisions required for its creation.

The above depiction of the current environment in which Ireland finds itself serves to underline the need for an acquisition policy designed ‘to develop in each individual Irish citizen a “single plurilingual competence”’ (Council of Europe, 2008a: 33). Such a policy must form part of a holistic education policy which avoids the need to set language learning against literacy and numeracy against science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects but instead focuses in an innovative, creative and flexible manner on the commonalities between subjects and the potential for the development of transferable skills as well as the contribution that each is capable of making to lifelong learning.

Particular recommendations concerning the language policy initiatives and decisions required to bring Ireland in linguistic terms in the direction of its optimum linguistic environment include the following. A range of languages should be reintroduced at primary level and creative, holistic and flexible approaches potentially including elements of CLIL found for their inclusion in an expanded curriculum which could be housed within a longer school year and a longer school day at both primary and secondary level.

A minimum of one foreign language should be made compulsory at second level and retained as a requirement for entry to third level. While retaining their autonomy, universities should be strongly encouraged, perhaps with a reference to future EU funding calls, to devote an element of their strategic planning to the role of foreign languages on all of their undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses.

Finally, a media campaign at government level with input from researchers in the field of attitudes towards language and language learning should be designed to promote awareness among the general public including, in particular, those with responsibility for strategic decision making of the importance for the individual, society and the economy of an increase in national language competence.

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