

## **The Place of Foreign Languages in the Irish Education System: Towards a more strategic approach**

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### **Abstract**

The chapter concerns the teaching and learning of foreign languages in the Republic of Ireland (referred to as 'Ireland' in the text). It critically assesses recent attempts to design and implement a national strategy for foreign languages in education designed to increase Ireland's foreign language capacity in line with national needs. Following a description of Ireland's linguistic and educational landscape, the chapter offers a review of recent approaches to the integration of foreign languages into Irish education. It focuses on the publication by the Irish Department of Education and Skills of *Languages Connect: Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026*. The chapter outlines the core objectives of this strategy before analysing the extent to which it has been implemented to date and its likely impact on foreign language teaching and learning in Ireland.

Key-words: Language Policy, Language Pedagogy, Foreign Languages, Language Strategy, Irish education

### **Introduction and Overview**

This chapter critically assesses recent policy developments in relation to the teaching of foreign languages in Ireland, and evaluates the extent to which they already have, and/or are likely to result in future increases in foreign language capacities, to the benefit of Irish society and the Irish economy. The chapter begins with a brief description of the place of languages other than English and Irish in the Irish education system, including recent policy developments marked by the publication of *Languages Connect: Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026* (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2017a). *Languages Connect* is Ireland's first official government strategy for foreign languages in education and represents an attempt to increase the quantity and quality of foreign language teaching and learning in Ireland. This chapter critiques this policy, particularly the extent to which it is likely to result in an increase in foreign language capacity that is in line with Ireland's needs.

### ***Foreign languages in the Irish education system***

The Republic of Ireland has two official languages, English and Irish (spoken as a first language by 3% of the population), and a long history of varying degrees of bilingualism as a result (Coady and O’Laoire, 2002). In addition, as a result of inward migration, Ireland’s linguistic profile has become increasingly diverse in recent years. Approximately 13% of the population in Ireland now regularly speak a language other than English or Irish at home, with the most commonly spoken languages being Polish, Lithuanian, Russian, Portuguese and Chinese (Central Statistics Office, 2017). Furthermore, 70% of students study a foreign language in Irish secondary schools. However, despite these facts, and in common with other countries where English is a widely spoken official language, foreign language capacity in Ireland remains below, for example, the EU average (Eurostat, 2018). Only approximately 30% of those aged between 25 and 64 in Ireland report knowledge of an additional foreign language compared with an EU average of 35% (and a UK figure of 20%). While this figure of 30% represents an increase of 9.1% on the 2011 figures, a series of recent reports continues to highlight the negative impact of Ireland’s lower than average foreign language capacity on its cultural, economic and social development (DES, 2016; Forfás, 2012).

Both English and Irish are mandatory subjects in Irish primary and secondary schools<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, pupils are taught both English and Irish from the ages of four or five. This means that they are familiar with the concept of speaking and learning more than one language from a young age. However, there is currently no mainstream provision in primary schools for the teaching of foreign languages. A relatively short-lived (from 1998 to 2012) *Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative* was discontinued or ‘paused due to the current economic climate’ (DES, 2012, p. 3) in December 2012 despite its initial successes in the 550 schools who participated. Some consideration was given to reinstating this programme in 2017. While these plans have not yet come to fruition (Bray, 2017), the government is currently considering a reintroduction of foreign languages into primary schools in 2024-25 (O’Brien, 2020). It is not yet clear what shape such a reintroduction may take, although current proposals by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment refer to a reduction in the time devoted to faith formation and a move to ‘curriculum areas’ rather than subjects, one of which is ‘languages’ including foreign languages.

In Irish secondary schools (attended by pupils aged 13-18), foreign languages are optional. However, individual secondary schools can decide to make them compulsory in terms of the choices they offer to

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<sup>1</sup> Exemptions from the study of Irish are granted in very limited circumstances including where a student has lived abroad and/or does not speak English. Students with significant learning difficulties and students in special schools may also be exempted.

students. For example, school pupils might be asked to choose one of French, German or Spanish when making their initial subject choices on entering secondary school for the first time. Approximately 90% of students study a language in their first three years of secondary school (Junior Cycle, for students generally aged between 13 and 15) and 70% study a language during the final two years (Senior Cycle, for students aged generally aged between 16 and 18)<sup>2</sup>. The range of languages on offer in secondary schools is relatively limited. More than 50% of pupils study French. The other languages offered are Spanish, German and Italian and, in a smaller number of schools, non-European and an increasing variety of lesser taught/heritage languages also. Private secondary schools<sup>3</sup>, who supplement their state-paid teaching hours with the extra income obtained from student fees, tend to provide a wider range of foreign languages (Donnelly, 2020).

The number of students studying foreign languages falls dramatically in Ireland between the end of secondary school and entry to Higher Education. Four percent, or approximately 9000 students, are engaged in the study of a foreign language in some capacity in Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (compared with a UK figure of 3.5% studying languages, literature and related subjects (UCAS, 2017) and 7.5% in the United States (Stein-Smith, 2019)). The Irish figure includes those studying foreign languages as part of a specialist language degree, those studying a foreign language combined with another discipline such as law or business, and those registered for a foreign language as a minor but accredited element of another programme (DES 2017a, p. 31). Approximately 6000 of these students are in one of the eight Irish universities and 3000 in one of the 14 Institutes of Technology (IoTs). While the reasons behind students not continuing with languages after secondary school remain unclear, they may be associated with a perception among secondary school pupils that languages are more difficult than other subjects (DES 2017a, p. 7) and a subsequent decision not to continue with them in Higher Education. The fall-off may also be associated with the well-documented perception in many Anglophone countries (Lanvers, 2011), including Ireland (O'Brien, 2019), that 'English is enough' and that there is neither need for nor value in investing time and effort in the study of an additional language.

### ***Towards a strategic approach to foreign languages in education in Ireland***

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<sup>2</sup> The difference between school uptake and language competencies reported in the adult population (29.9%) may arise from relatively low proficiency at school exit point, combined with the lack of exposure, in adults, to languages other than English after leaving secondary school at the age of 17 or 18.

<sup>3</sup> Private schools make up approximately 7% of secondary schools in Ireland.

In 2014, the Irish government tasked the DES with the design and publication of Ireland's first official government strategy for foreign languages in education. This took place within the broader context of the publication of Ireland's *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (Hunt, 2011) and built upon previous collaborative efforts by the Council of Europe in tandem with the DES (Department of Education and Science/Council of Europe, 2008), and, subsequently by the Royal Irish Academy (2011). The DES began the process by reviewing the relevant policies, which had been published up to that point, and engaging in widespread public consultation. The purpose of the consultation was to inform the design of a new ten-year strategy for foreign languages in education. The core mission of the resulting strategy, *Languages Connect: Ireland's strategy for foreign languages in education 2017-26*, is formulated as follows:

...that Ireland's education system will promote a society where the ability to learn and use at least one foreign language is taken for granted, because of its inherent value for individuals, society and the economy (DES, 2017a, p.7).

*Languages Connect* goes on to identify four key objectives which underpin the strategy (DES, 2017a, p. 8). These are to:

1. Improve language proficiency by creating a more engaging language learning environment
2. Diversify and increase the uptake of languages learned and cultivate the languages of the new Irish
3. Increase awareness of the importance of language learning to encourage the wider use of foreign languages
4. Enhance employer engagement in the development and use of trade languages

These objectives concern all stages of education from primary to Higher Education in Ireland, and aim to increase societal awareness of the value of language learning. The objectives were operationalised into ten specific goals (DES, 2017a, p. 1111), to be achieved by 2026, as follows:

1. Increase the uptake in key languages from their present Leaving Certificate examination uptakes: German (13%), Spanish (11%), Italian (0.9%), Russian (0.6%), Japanese (0.6%), Arabic (0.2%), Mandarin Chinese (N/A), Portuguese (0.2% - non-curricular).
2. Introduce a curricular specification for new learners of Mandarin Chinese for Leaving Certificate and curricular specifications for heritage speakers for Polish, Lithuanian and Portuguese.

3. Increase in the number of secondary schools offering two or more foreign languages and increase the number of students sitting two languages for state examinations by 25% (from a baseline of approximately 2.65% of an approximate total of 40,000 students annually).
4. Increase the proportion of the higher education cohort studying a foreign language, in any capacity, as part of their course to 20%.
5. Increase the number of participants in Erasmus+ by at least 50%.
6. Double the number of teachers participating in teacher mobility programmes.
7. Double the number of Foreign Language Assistants.
8. Improvement in learners’ attitude to foreign language learning.
9. Improvement in the quality of foreign language teaching at all levels.
10. Adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) in education and by employers and increase the proportion of graduates leaving Higher Education who reach the “Independent User” standard.

In order to address the erroneous perception, alluded to at the end of the previous section, that English is enough, Languages Connect also acknowledges the need for a change in attitude or ‘a significant change of mindset’ (DES, 2017a, p. 12) in relation to foreign language learning in Ireland. The DES acknowledges the time and resource implications if the above outcomes are to be achieved.

To address the well-known difficulties associated with bridging the gap between language education policy and practice (Hornberger and Johnson, 2007) the DES produced a detailed Implementation Plan (DES, 2017b) to accompany Languages Connect. It also established a Foreign Languages Advisory Group (FLAG)<sup>4</sup> whose responsibility is to oversee the implementation of measures intended to achieve the goals of Languages Connect. Specifically, FLAG is responsible for the achievement of the following targets (Table 1):

**Table 2.1: Languages Connect – Targets**

Measure	Baseline (2016)	Mid-term Target (2022)	End Target (2026)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Curriculum-and-Syllabus/Foreign-Languages-Strategy/foreign-languages-advisory-group-flag-.html>

1. Percentage Of Candidates Presenting For A Foreign Language For Junior Certificate/Cycle Examination	87%	92%	100%
2. Percentage Of Junior Certificate/Cycle Candidates Sitting German, Spanish And Italian As A Proportion Of Total Curricular Foreign Language Sits	40%	45%	50%
3. Percentage Of Schools Offering Two Or More Foreign Languages As Part Of Transition Year	53%	75%	100%
4. Percentage Of Candidates Presenting For A Foreign Language For Leaving Certificate Examination	69%	74%	79%
5. Percentage Of Leaving Certificate Candidates Sitting German, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Japanese And Arabic As A Proportion Of Total Curricular Foreign Language Sits	38%	41%	45%
6. Percentage Of Students Studying Courses With A Language Component In Higher Education	4 (12/13)	10	20
7. Learner Attitudes Towards Foreign Language Learning	To be established <sup>5</sup>		
8. Participation In Erasmus+ In Higher Education And Other Study And Work Placements Abroad	3,135	4,400	5,400
9. Improvement In CEFR Levels Of Returning Erasmus+ Students	63% at B2 or above	68% at B2 or above	75% at B2 or above
10. Number Of Foreign Language Assistants Coming To Ireland	110	160	220
11. Percentage Of Employers Reporting Use Of The CEFR	To be established		
12. Percentage Of Employers Reporting Use Of Language Management Strategies (LMS)	To be established		
13. Number Of Education And Training Providers Incorporating LMSs Into MBA And Other Executive Education Programmes	To be established		

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<sup>5</sup> No baseline information currently exists in relation to items 7, 11, 12, 13, hence the use of 'to be established' in the policy document, Languages Connect.

FLAG contains representatives from the DES, the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Post-Primary Languages Initiative<sup>6</sup>, language experts, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the Irish Business and Employers' Confederation, the Higher Education Authority, Léargas<sup>7</sup>, the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, Language Teacher Professional Networks and the National Parents Council. FLAG is answerable to the DES and is required to produce an Annual Report to the Minister for Education and Skills.

In addition, the government presented the Languages Connect strategy as part of a *Higher Education Authority Systems Performance Framework 2018-2020*. This means that the achievement or otherwise of Languages Connect targets by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) may have an impact on the amount of funding they receive from the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the statutory body responsible for the allocation of exchequer funds to HEIs, thereby incentivising them to reach these targets. This represents an innovation in Ireland in terms of language policy making and may help to ensure that Languages Connect has a greater impact than previous strategies.

The following section considers the progress that has been made to date, evaluates some of the initiatives designed to implement Languages Connect, and reviews the remaining challenges.

### ***Ireland's foreign languages-in-education policy: A critique***

*Languages Connect* calls for the coherent, planned provision of foreign languages across the different areas or stages of education, i.e. from primary to secondary, and in relation to further, higher and lifelong education. The goals and targets identified are characterised by a complex interdependency. For example, a lack of foreign language graduates has resulted in a shortage of candidates for positions as teachers of foreign languages in Irish secondary schools. Furthermore, increased numbers studying a greater range of languages in secondary schools and in the Higher Education Sector is only achievable if a shift in attitude towards the value of language learning among the wider public occurs.

In order to achieve such attitudinal change, away from the view that 'English is enough', Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI)<sup>8</sup> have been tasked by the DES with developing an awareness raising campaign,

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<sup>6</sup> <https://ppli.ie/>

<sup>7</sup> The National Agency for the European exchange programme Erasmus+ in Adult Education, School Education, Vocational Education and Training and Youth [<https://www.leargas.ie/>]

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.ppli.ie/>

also known as Languages Connect (same name as the whole policy initiative)<sup>9</sup>. The PPLI is a dedicated unit linked to the DES with responsibility for supporting foreign language learning in Ireland, primarily in secondary schools. To date, the awareness raising campaign has been mainly active on social media platforms, for example, Twitter. The campaign team, which includes Education Officers, Language Advisors, a team of associates, a marketing team and a large number of foreign language teachers<sup>10</sup>, is engaged in the organisation of a series of high profile events. These events are designed to convince students and the wider public of the value of learning foreign languages. One such event, for example, targeted secondary school students and was attended by representatives of HEIs, the European Commission and the France-Ireland Chamber of Commerce<sup>11</sup>. High profile figures from business domain are participating in the campaign, such as Julie Sinnamon, Chief Executive of Enterprise Ireland, the body responsible for supporting Irish Small and Medium Sized Enterprises in growth and internationalisation. Sinnamon recently emphasised in the context of an event organised by *Languages Connect* that:

“In the context of Brexit, we have set an ambitious target in Enterprise Ireland to grow exports outside of the UK by 50 per cent by 2020 and if you want to be taken seriously in foreign countries, you really need to be able to speak the language” (O’Brien, 2019).

The PPLI’s Languages Connect awareness raising campaign will be central to addressing the lack of appreciation of the social and economic value of foreign language learning common to Anglophone countries. Its degree of success will also be important in determining whether many of the target outcomes articulated in Languages Connect are achieved or not. This is due to the fact that the numbers choosing to continue the study of foreign languages beyond secondary school is hindered less by a lack of availability of places on modern foreign language degrees in Higher Education than by a low level of demand for these places. This is to not to say that scope does not exist for an increase in the number of language degrees and the range of languages on offer in Higher Education in Ireland. As in secondary schools, there is a need for a greater variety of languages to be taught in universities and IoTs.

However, an online campaign alone is unlikely to achieve the desired increases in foreign language capacity in Ireland unless it is supported by top-down changes in language education policy. For example, a particular issue in relation to Ireland’s foreign language capacity is the dominance of French in schools and as a result in Higher Education. Therefore, alongside a change in attitudes towards the

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.languagesconnect.ie/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.languagesconnect.ie/about>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.franceireland.ie/>

value of the study of language, a diversification in the languages offered in secondary schools is also required if the objectives of Languages Connect are to be achieved. A first step has been taken on this issue with the completion of a curricular outline for Mandarin Chinese and its addition in 2019 to the list of languages available to students as official School Leaving Certificate options. Curricula for Polish, Lithuanian and Portuguese for heritage speakers are currently in development (Donnelly, 2020).

Initiatives such as increased funding for secondary school exchanges and for the hiring of language assistants (Target 10, Table 1) also undoubtedly represent progress towards achieving the targets of Languages Connect. However, the fact that individual schools are required to engage in competitive applications for limited funding rather than its being made available to schools as part of an overarching policy decision acts as a barrier to more widespread progress. Overall responsibility for the achievement of the goals of Languages Connect in primary and secondary schools lies with the DES. Thus, it is within the remit of the DES to ensure that the progress made to date can be cascaded more widely, and not limited to small-scale initiatives.

An important difference in accountability between the school and the Higher Education sector lies in the autonomous nature of HEIs. However, as their achievements in relation to Languages Connect are associated with the amount of funding they receive, HEIs are incentivised to achieve the targets set. To date, the precise impact of this association is not yet clear, however, nor is the nature of any potential sanctions or penalties, if any, should HEIs not reach specific targets. This tension exemplifies the dilemma that, on the one hand, the body regulating HEIs, the Higher Education Authority, is required to have 'due regard to institutional autonomy and academic freedom', but on the other hand, is also responsible for ensuring that 'institutional strategies are aligned with national strategic objectives'.<sup>12</sup>

There is evidence that some HEIs are recognising the need, for example to educate more language teachers. For instance, a new degree programme for future language teachers at Dublin City University had its first intake in September 2019 while more are in the planning stages (Bruen, 2019a & 2019b). While welcome, these degree programmes continue to focus on the large European languages traditionally offered, i.e. French, German and Spanish. The addition of other world languages is also required to meet the needs of secondary schools, Irish society and the Irish economy. Such languages include Polish, Lithuanian, Arabic, Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese and Russian. In addition, the design of

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<sup>12</sup> <https://hea.ie/about-us/overview/>

new routes into teaching are called for. One such initiative would be to facilitate accelerated teacher training for native speakers of a modern foreign language as language teachers without the requirement to complete an undergraduate language degree followed by a teaching qualification programme, known in Ireland as a Professional Masters in Education. This is an area in which there is the potential to make rapid progress in the training of language teachers.

Within the Higher Education sector, the IoTs appear to face particular challenges. Recent studies (Berthaud, Walsh and Brogan, 2018; Carthy, 2019a) and reports (Higher Education Authority, 2015) indicate that very few students are studying foreign languages in these institutions. There is increasingly limited provision of foreign languages as well as low levels of institutional support for the reversal of this trend, with some academics being encouraged to retrain in disciplines other than languages (Carthy 2019a & 2019b). Thus, in IoTs, Languages Connect does not appear to have had an impact, either on planning for language provision, or practice of language teaching delivery, resulting in a gap between institutional policy and practices on the one hand, and the national priorities called out in Languages Connect, on the other. This points to a differential among HEIs in the delivery of foreign languages , whereby some more vocationally orientated HEIs de-prioritise languages, a phenomenon that has also been observed in the UK (Lanvers, 2017; Liddicoat, this volume).

### ***Concluding remarks***

The Republic of Ireland has some advantages when it comes to foreign languages in education. Inward migration has resulted in a pupil population which is increasingly linguistically diverse (Little & Kirwan, 2019, and this volume). This means that many children are exposed to diverse languages and cultures with primary schools in particular finding creative ways to harness this diversity (Kirwan, 2015). Furthermore, the compulsory bilingual offering of English and Irish in primary and secondary education means that pupils develop at least a basic understanding and appreciation of the processes involved in language learning (Beaver, 2017; Dunmore, 2015). It also means that school pupils possess a repertoire of at least two languages from a young age to which they can continue to add over the course of their lives. The study of two languages (English and Irish) does, however, require time within the school curriculum. To date, too little consideration has been given to the requirement that Irish remain compulsory in the final two years of secondary school, the senior cycle. At this point, pupils are likely to benefit from freedom of choice in relation to the nature of their own linguistic repertoire.

In secondary schools, there is a strong uptake from ages 13 to 18 of a limited range of foreign languages with an emphasis on French although curricula have recently been designed for additional languages. At present, progress in diversifying target languages is slow and limited to a small number of schools. Schools aiming to diversify their languages face challenges in relation to resourcing and teacher supply. One promising initiative, in terms of potentially breaking the cycle of low levels of provision of languages not traditionally taught in Ireland and a resulting small pool of language teachers to teach these languages, is the introduction of an accelerated route to teaching qualifications in languages by native speakers. The success and uptake of such an initiative remains to be seen. Other governmental measures, such as the incentivisation of school exchanges and the increased use of Language Assistants<sup>13</sup>, are equally welcome. These initiatives would have a greater impact if they were mainstreamed and schools were not required to apply for limited funding.

The objectives of Languages Connect have not yet permeated the IoT sector. More effective government oversight, for instance by the Higher Education Authority, is required to ensure the necessary alignment of policy and practice with national objectives. Currently there is little indication as to how this will be achieved.

A particular challenge in Ireland and in all countries where English is an official language remains the perceived global dominance of English and a related lack of awareness and appreciation of the social, cultural and economic value of learning foreign languages (Introduction, this volume). The language awareness campaign described in this chapter represents a welcome development and constitutes a crucial aspect of the Languages Connect strategy. However, without government oversight of its implementation in practice, it faces an uphill battle. Experiences elsewhere suggest that merely aiming to 'convince' relevant stakeholders and the wider public, via online campaigns and learned arguments, of the social, cultural and economic value of foreign language learning, will yield little result (Lanvers, 2011). To conclude, the future of foreign language learning in Ireland will depend ultimately on the success of policy makers in reducing, by any combination of 'carrot and stick' approaches necessary, the discrepancy between policy announcements, on the one hand, and the practical and financial support of teaching institutions in implementing these, on the other.

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<sup>13</sup> Students studying for an English language degree in another country and spending their year abroad working as language teaching assistants in Irish schools.

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