

# Foreign Language Learning in the Republic of Ireland: Developments, Challenges, Policy Implications

Jennifer Bruen | October 2023 | Policy Papers

- **Increasing Linguistic Diversity:** The Republic of Ireland (RoI) has two official languages, English and Irish, with English spoken almost universally. In addition, 15% of the population now speak a foreign language, i.e., a language other than English or Irish, at home. The top five languages are Polish, Romanian, French, Spanish and Portuguese.
- **Primary School System:** Primary school pupils will be taught a foreign language from 2025. This welcome development should be closely monitored in relation to the pupil/teacher experience, the time devoted to foreign languages and the transition to secondary school.
- **Secondary School System:** Approximately 80% of pupils study a foreign language in the first secondary school cycle and 76% in the second. The range of languages taught has recently been diversified.
- **Higher Education (HE):** There is a significant difference between the numbers studying a foreign language in HE (approximately 4%) compared with the numbers studying a foreign language at the end of secondary school (76%). This results in a lack of foreign language teachers and contributes to a lack of foreign language capacity in other areas, including industry. Higher Education Institutions should consider an Institution Wide Language Programme in tandem with specialist foreign language degrees, and degrees combining foreign languages with other disciplines.
- **Industry and Enterprise:** Industry needs more graduates who speak foreign languages. Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) also need a more strategic approach to communication with customers and suppliers who speak languages other than English. 'Language Management Strategies' (LMSs) involve the use of employees with language skills, professional translators, translation tools, students on placements, local agents and intermediaries.

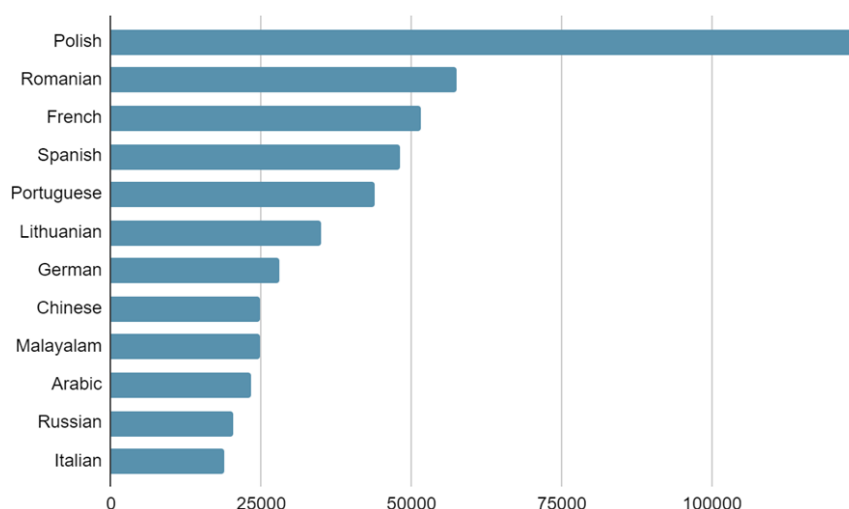
**Government agencies supporting internationalisation should encourage SMEs to develop LMSs while universities should ensure that language students are familiar with them.**

This paper reviews key developments, trends and challenges in foreign language learning in the Republic of Ireland (RoI) against a backdrop of increasing linguistic diversity in the population. It considers these issues under four headings, the primary school system, the secondary school system, Higher Education (HE) and industry. The paper concludes with some recommendations for potential policy interventions which could further promote foreign languages in the RoI and similar contexts internationally.

## Context: The Changing Linguistic Profile of the ROI

The RoI has two official languages, English, which is spoken almost universally, and Irish. According to the most recent census data ([Central Statistics Office 2023](#)), 1,873,997 of the RoI's 5,149,139 residents (36%) can speak at least some Irish. Of these 10% reported that they speak Irish very well and 32% that they speak it well. The 2022 census results further indicate that 20% of the population of the RoI were born outside of the RoI and that 15% responded in the affirmative to the question, 'Do you speak a language other than English or Irish at home?'. This represents an increase of 23% on the 2016 figure. Approximately 28% of those who speak a foreign language at home were born in the RoI. The top twelve foreign languages spoken are Polish, Romanian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Lithuanian, German, Chinese, Malayalam, Arabic, Russian and Italian (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Languages (other than English or Irish) spoken at home. Source: Census 2022 Summary Report



Fifty-seven percent of those who reported speaking a language other than English or Irish at home indicated that they speak English very well. A further 26% of this cohort indicate that they speak English well. This nonetheless leaves 19% who may need English language support or translation and interpreting services.

## Languages in the School System

The education system in the RoI consists of four main stages:

- Preschool (ages 0-4)
- Primary school (ages 4/5 to 11/12)
- Secondary school (ages 12/13 to 18/19) and
- HE (ages 18+).

The medium of instruction is English except in Irish-Medium schools which make up between eight and nine percent of schools. English and Irish are compulsory subjects in all primary and secondary schools and must be studied by pupils throughout the education system, with a small number of exceptions in the case of Irish (Gallagher 2021).

### *Primary schools*

Foreign languages have not traditionally been taught in primary schools in the RoI. One exception was a pilot initiative which took place from 1998 to 2012. However, as part of the new Primary Curriculum Framework developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and launched by the Minister for Education in March 2023 ([Department of Education \(DoE\) 2023](#)), pupils aged 8/9 to 11/12, will study a foreign language from 2025 for approximately one hour per week. This initiative is a promising one deserving of close monitoring and meaningful support. It is important that the Department of Education (DoE) gather feedback in relation to the amount of time devoted to foreign languages and whether one hour per week is sufficient, the experience of teachers and pupils involved in teaching and learning foreign languages, and the transition to secondary school for groups of students who may have been introduced to different languages in primary school.

Additionally, there is increasing evidence of the value of linguistically inclusive education for the promotion of social cohesion (Little and Kirwan 2019). At the level of the increasingly multilingual classrooms in the RoI, teachers can raise awareness

among their pupils of the range of languages spoken by their classmates as well as employing a range of plurilingual pedagogies. It is important that research informed training in the use of such pedagogies be included in teacher education programmes. EAL (English as an Additional Language) support is provided in some primary and secondary schools where assessment of pupils indicates that it is necessary.

### *Secondary schools*

Foreign languages are optional in Irish secondary schools. In practice, however, many schools make a foreign language compulsory in terms of the choices offered to pupils. Approximately 80% of children study a language in their first three years of secondary school (Junior Cycle) and approximately 76% study a language during the final two years (Senior Cycle). The range of languages on offer is expanding (Table 1).

*Table 1: Leaving Certificate Foreign Languages 2019-2022*

<b>Language/Year</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>
<b>French</b>	23,361	22,863	22,069	22,135
<b>German</b>	8,544	8,698	8,603	8,438
<b>Spanish</b>	7,711	8,330	8,586	9,975
<b>Italian</b>	473	396	456	571
<b>Japanese</b>	274	260	298	294
<b>Russian</b>	458	367	481	432
<b>Arabic</b>	192	171	188	217
<b>Mandarin</b>	-	-	-	291
<b>Lithuanian</b>	-	-	-	191
<b>Polish</b>	-	-	-	824
<b>Portuguese</b>	-	-	-	145
<b>Non-Curricular Languages*</b>	611	329	559	769
<b>Total</b>	42,681	42,013	42,177	44,282

This welcome diversification of the range of languages which can be taught is partly due to the work of Post Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI), a dedicated unit tasked by the Irish government with diversifying, enhancing and expanding the teaching of languages in secondary schools. The non-curricular languages are languages which

are not taught within schools but in which those who speak them at home can take an examination as part of the final school Leaving Certificate Examination. They include Latvian, Romanian, Slovenian, Modern Greek, Finnish, Estonian, Slovakian, Swedish, Czech, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Danish, Dutch, Croatian, and Maltese (Languages Connect 2022). Ideally, as part of an ongoing process of diversification of the languages offered in schools, the DoE and PPLI would ensure that more of these languages should join the list of curricular languages. This will be important in ensuring that hierarchies of languages, in terms of their prestige, are countered wherever possible. Pupils who have already studied these languages formally within the school system are more likely to take up the option of studying them in HE should the opportunity present itself, in turn increasing the supply of teachers of these languages in the longer term.

## Foreign Languages in Higher Education

The RoI is home to eight Universities and five Technological Universities. While approximately 76% of pupils take a foreign language as part of the final school leaving examination, only approximately four percent, or 9000 undergraduate students, study a foreign language in HE. This figure includes those studying foreign languages as part of a specialist language degree, those studying a foreign language on an equal footing with another discipline such as law, business, or politics, and those registered for a foreign language as a minor but accredited element of another programme (Bruen, 2021; Languages Connect: Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026) While this figure compares favourably with, for example, the United Kingdom (UK) which some commentators suggest may have fallen below the one percent mark in recent years for students on specialist language degrees ([Lopez Menchero 2021](#)), it nonetheless represents a dramatic fall off in the numbers studying language between the end of secondary school and entry into HE. The reasons why many students choose not to continue with languages after secondary school are unclear. They may be associated with a perception among secondary school pupils that languages are more difficult than other subjects. The fall-off may also be associated with the perception, common in Anglophone countries, that 'English is enough'. It may also be the case that while students may have an interest in languages, they do not wish to devote themselves entirely or even significantly to the study of languages at third level, preferring instead to enter an alternative discipline.

The latter point supports the case for the development in the RoI of Institution Wide Language Programmes (IWLPs). IWLPs usually consist of a programme of modules at

different levels of difficulty in different languages which can be taken by non-specialist language learners as options on university degree programmes. The language modules can also be studied in addition to degree programmes, often in the evening and sometimes for extra credit. Ideally, students successfully completing language modules should receive proof in the form of certification of the level that they have achieved to supplement their main degree certification. The language studied by a student alongside their degree programme can be a language they speak at home, a language they learned in school or a language new to them. In this way, the home language can be officially recognised, the work done in secondary school can be built upon, and linguistically talented students can take up an additional language. Two of the eight universities in the RoI currently offer some form of IWLP. One offers language optional language modules in 14 languages that students may choose to take as part of their main degree programme provided their degree allows for this, while a second facilitates the study of either one or two language modules in years two and three of its undergraduate programmes. In both cases, the language modules are integrated into the main degree and offered as options against other subjects. A third university in the RoI is currently piloting an IWLP which gives students the opportunity to study a language, free of charge, in parallel to their main degree, for extra credit and additional certification. This programme currently offers Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Russian and Spanish. A limited amount of research has been published on IWLPs. However, a survey carried out in the UK by the University Council of Modern Languages in conjunction with the Association of University Language Centres indicates a high degree of linguistic diversity among the students who choose to participate in them, with speakers of English as a first language underrepresented on IWLP courses ([UCML-AULC 2022](#)). The time is ripe in an increasingly linguistically diverse RoI for the more widespread introduction of IWLPs.

The relatively small numbers studying language at Higher Level in the RoI contributes to the significant shortage of foreign language teachers for primary and secondary schools, highlighted, for example, in Languages Connect: Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages 2017-2026. One way to address this would be to develop and expand university programmes designed to train teachers of languages. One example is the Bachelor of Education in Irish, French, German and Spanish offered by [Dublin City University](#). Universities could consider adding more languages to these and similar programmes.

## Foreign languages and the Economy

A range of studies indicate that the small numbers studying language post secondary schooling negatively impacts the Irish economy. The 2022 World Talent Ranking ([Institute for Management Development World Competitiveness Centre 2022](#)) placed the RoI 34th in terms of the extent to which the foreign language skills of its citizens are meeting the needs of enterprise. Similarly, in 2017, the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) observed that a lack of foreign language competence is resulting in missed opportunities for Irish exporters and particularly for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs). SMEs are particularly important to the economy of the RoI. They account for 99.8% of all business enterprises in the private business economy and employ 1.06 million people (68.4% of employment in the private business economy) ([Power 2020](#)). An increase in the number of language graduates or students graduating from another discipline with a qualification in language, for example via an IWLP, would go some way towards addressing this problem. Ideally, this qualification would be at a minimum level of B1/B2 (Independent User) in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). While specialist language knowledge relevant to the particular business domain would also be valuable, it is generally not essential as a solid basis in a foreign language and an understanding of the language tools and supports available to business mean that even lower proficiency levels, which can be built upon, can prove valuable in business contexts.

On a related point, several large-scale European studies ([ELAN 2006](#); [PIMLICO 2011](#)) as well as our study of SMEs in the RoI and Northern Ireland (Brien and Buckley 2022) call for a more strategic approach to communication requiring the use of languages other than English by SMEs. Specifically, the development of a 'Language Management Strategy' (LMS) is recommended as preferable to a more ad hoc approach to communication with customers and suppliers who speak languages other than English. An LMS is described in more detail as:

the planned adoption of a range of techniques to facilitate effective communication with clients and suppliers abroad whose first language is not English (Feely and Harzing 2003: 38).

Such a planned approach generally involves considering the relative merit of each of the following and their use as appropriate:

- Employees with relevant language skills



- Professional translators
- Translation tools
- University students on placements and internships with relevant language skills
- Local agents and
- Intermediaries

The results of our study (Bruen and Buckley 2022) revealed that approximately one third of the 15 SMEs we surveyed who are based in the RoI have an LMS (compared with approximately 4% of the 23 SMEs in Northern Ireland who participated in the study). This compares with an EU average of 48% (European Commission 2006). Approximately one-fifth of these SMEs reported missing out on a business opportunity for reasons directly related to foreign languages, with Japan and Saudi Arabia mentioned as specific examples of locations where this had been an issue. Based on our research, we recommend that more SMEs in the RoI integrate language planning into their strategic planning processes by developing and adopting an LMS that is appropriate for them. Enterprise Ireland, the government agency responsible for supporting enterprises in the RoI who wish to trade internationally, offers several support services in the area of communication through languages other than English, some of which are currently underutilised. These include translating and interpreting services, and guidance in relation to agents and intermediaries. While universities in the RoI offer their students various modules in, for example, in areas relating to intercultural business management and internationalisation, explicit references to the role of foreign languages do not appear in the module descriptors. There is limited research in this area but this also largely appears to be the case internationally with the exception of some courses delivered within the Australian Higher Education system (Bruen 2019).

## Recommendations

The following contains a summary of the recommendations for potential policy interventions contained in this article. Such interventions could further promote foreign languages in the RoI at the classroom level, at the level of the school system, in HE, and for industry.



### *Classroom Level and Pedagogical Approaches*

The RoI is increasingly linguistically diverse with many more languages spoken at home than previously. Pupils and students in classrooms at all levels within the education system speak a greater range of languages. This diversity should be acknowledged and celebrated by schools and Higher Education Institutions. Pupils and students in these classrooms should, at a minimum, be made aware of the languages spoken by their classmates. There are also many pedagogical activities involving a range of languages which can be used to incorporate linguistic diversity and home languages into the classroom. Our research in this area (Bruen and Kelly 2016).

Underlines the value of incorporating plurilingual pedagogies into teacher education, both Initial Teacher Education and Continuous Professional Development.

### *Primary and Secondary School*

At school level, the planned introduction of languages into primary schools and the diversification of languages offered in secondary schools is to be commended. It should continue to be carefully monitored and supported via research-informed teacher training and curriculum development. Issues deserving of focus include the pupil/teacher experience of foreign language learning, the time allocated to foreign language learning and the transition to foreign language learning in secondary school particularly in terms of level. At secondary school, the continued expansion of the range of curricular foreign languages by the DoE is to be welcomed.

### *HE*

Every effort should be made by universities and other Higher Education Institutions to increase the numbers studying languages. This can be done in several ways. These include diversifying the languages offered on specialist degrees, adding to the disciplines with which languages can be studied and introducing and expanding IWLPs.

### *Industry and Enterprise*

Finally, industry and particularly SMEs should be encouraged by organisations who support the internationalisation of SMEs, such as [Enterprise Ireland](#), to develop a more strategic approach to communication through languages other than English using the many tools and supports available for this purpose. Universities should also incorporate the study of strategic language management for business into degree programmes particularly for students of foreign languages and business.

## Further reading

Bruen, Jennifer. 2019. Languages Connect and the languages of the new Irish: A discussion paper. [TEANGA, the Journal of the Irish Association for Applied Linguistics](#), 26, 116–123.

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## Cite this article

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