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Piloting an institution-wide language programme in an Irish university: a longitudinal case study

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a study designed to contribute to discussion on best practice in the design of Institution Wide Language Programmes (IWLPs) and their role in increasing the number of students studying foreign languages in Higher Education in Anglophone contexts. Using a longitudinal case study, it reviews the first three semesters of an IWLP delivered in a university in the Republic of Ireland between February 2021 and May 2022. The findings indicate that a student-centred, pedagogically innovative IWLP, incentivised via certification and extra credit, can enable and motivate some students to continue with the study of a language at university. This represents one way to build on foreign language proficiency developed within both the school system and the home, in line with national language policy objectives.

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Institution wide language programmes; university language learning; 'Languages Connect'; language learning and teaching; language policy; language pedagogy

Introduction

This paper reviews the first three semesters of an Institution Wide Language Programme (IWLP) delivered in an Irish university between February 2021 and May 2022 using a longitudinal case study approach. The objectives of the study are twofold: Firstly, to contribute to discussion on best practice in the design of IWLPs and, secondly, to consider their role in increasing the number of students studying foreign languages in Higher Education in Anglophone contexts. In order to contextualise the study, the article begins with an overview of the linguistic profile of the Republic of Ireland (henceforth 'Ireland') and the place of foreign languages within its education system. This is followed by a review of research and practice in relation to IWLPs. The case study is then presented. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the findings in relation to the research objectives.

The languages of Ireland

Ireland 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

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Ireland's 5,149,139 residents (36%) speak at least some Irish. Of these, 10% speak Irish very well and 32% speak it well. The census data also shows that 20% of the population were born outside of Ireland and 15% speak a language other than English or Irish at home. This represents an increase of 23% on the 2016 census figure. Approximately 28% of those who speak a language other than English or Irish at home were born in Ireland. The top twelve languages are Polish, Romanian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Lithuanian, German, Chinese, Malayalam, Arabic, Russian and Italian (Figure 1).

The education system has four stages:

- Preschool (ages 0-4)
- Primary school (ages 4/5–12/13)
- Secondary school (ages 12/13–18/19) and
- Further and higher Education (ages 18/19+).

The medium of instruction is English with the exception of Irish-Medium schools which make up approximately eight percent of schools. Both English and Irish are compulsory subjects in primary and secondary schools with some exceptions in the case of Irish (Gallagher, 2021).

In primary schools, a Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative (MLPSI) (1998–2012) resulted in French, German, Italian and Spanish being taught in selected primary schools. Despite many successes, the initiative was controversially discontinued for economic reasons in 2012 (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2012; Harris & Conway, 2002; Harris & O'Leary, 2009). However, building on some of the achievements of the MLPSI and as part of the recently launched *Primary Curriculum Framework* (Department of Education [DoE], 2023a), foreign languages will be (re-)introduced for all pupils from

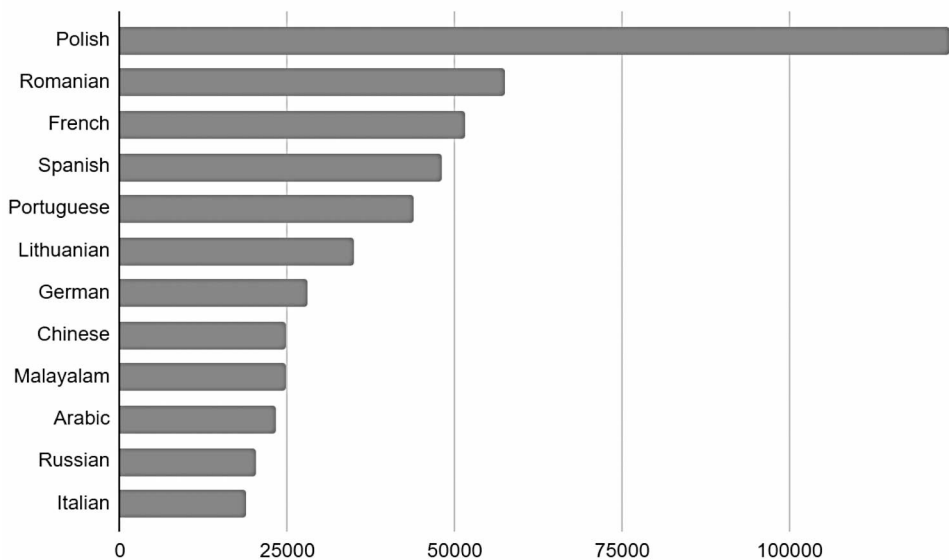


Figure 1. Languages (other than English or Irish) spoken at home. Source: Census 2022 Summary Report.

third to sixth class (aged approximately 9–12) from the 2025/26 school year. Since 2021, primary schools have been invited to participate in a *Say Yes to Languages* sampler module (DoE, 2023b) which runs over eight weeks. Twenty-four percent of schools currently (2023) participate in this programme.

In secondary schools, foreign languages are optional. In practice, however, individual secondary schools frequently make a foreign language compulsory in terms of the choices they offer. Approximately 84% of students study a language in their first three years of secondary school (Junior Cycle) and approximately 74% during the final two years (Senior Cycle) (DoE, 2024). The range of languages on offer was traditionally limited with a focus on French, Spanish and German (Bruen, 2021) but has been increasing (Table 1). This is partly due to the addition of Mandarin, Lithuanian, Polish and Portuguese, as curricular languages. The ‘non-curricular’ languages are not part of the normal school curriculum but students may opt to take them where they meet certain criteria.

All seven Irish universities offer students the opportunity to study Modern Foreign Languages (unlike some other Anglophone contexts [see for example Muradás-Taylor and Taylor 2024] in relation to the situation in England). However, the number of students studying foreign languages falls dramatically between the end of secondary school in Ireland and entry to Higher Education. Approximately four percent of students study a foreign language in Irish HEIs. This includes those studying foreign languages as part of a specialist language degree, combined with another discipline or as a minor element of another programme (DES, 2017, p. 31).

The reasons why students choose not to continue with languages after secondary school may be associated with a perception that languages are more difficult than other subjects (DES, 2017, p. 7) or that ‘English is enough’ (Bruen, 2021). It may also be the case that while students may have an interest in languages, they do not wish to devote themselves to the study of languages at third level, preferring instead to enter an alternative discipline. This contributes to Ireland’s below average performance on EU measures of linguistic competency. In 2016, 50.9% of those aged between 25 and 64 in Ireland reported that they knew one or more foreign languages compared to an EU average of 64.6% (Eurostat, 2019). Findings from industry and academia (Bruen, 2019; Bruen and Buckley, 2022) indicate that a

Table 1. Leaving certificate languages 2019–2022.

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

Source: Presentation by the Post-Primary Languages Initiative, Department of Education [20.01.2023].

lack of foreign language capacity impacts negatively on social, cultural and economic development.

In an attempt to address this issue, the DES with the development of Ireland's first official strategy for foreign languages in education, *Languages Connect: Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017–2026*. One objective of the strategy is 'to increase the proportion of the higher education cohort studying a foreign language, in any capacity, as part of their course to 20%' (DES, 2017, p. 1111). Although the strategy does not outline how these targets are to be met, several possibilities present themselves. These include increasing numbers on existing foreign language degrees, developing new degree programmes either entirely focussed on foreign languages or including foreign languages alongside another discipline and/or the development of IWLPs (Bruen, 2019). The focus of the remainder of this paper is on this third option.

IWLPs: design and context

IWLPs consist of suites of language modules which can be taken by non-specialist language learners as options, or 'electives', on degree programmes. The modules can also be studied on a co-curricular or extracurricular basis, often in the evening and sometimes incentivised via extra credit. Depending on the funding model, a charge is sometimes associated with IWLPs (Bruen, 2019) which can constitute a barrier to participation for students. Some IWLPs are designed and delivered by Language Centres within HEIs and others by the HEIs' language schools or departments.

Language modules on IWLPs share many similarities with those offered on specialist language degrees. However, given limited contact hours and the fact that students are completing them in parallel to a university degree, they often focus in a flexible and pragmatic way on the development of listening, speaking, reading and writing the target language. Some studies suggest that there is less focus on literature and cultural studies than on more specialist language degrees although the culture of the target language and the development of intercultural competence continue to play an important role (Aski et al., 2023; Carson, 2010; Johnson, 2015; Polisca & Wright, 2019).

Attrition rates tend to be higher on IWLPs than on specialist language degrees. For example, a study conducted by the London School of Economics on their 2014/15 cohort of students reported that 13% of students studied a language either as a non-credit bearing extra-curricular option (85%) or as an elective on their main degree (15%) (Skrandies, 2016). Just over 70% of students who enrolled received a certificate and 43% of these a first class honours grade. The 30% attrition rate, which is in line with that observed in a second survey of other UK institutions (UCML AULC, 2022), was primarily due to students deregistering for language modules or failing to submit assignments. The reasons for the attrition rate were varied. The most important reflected the fact that students had underestimated their workload for both the language and their main degree. The report nonetheless concludes that:

... it would be wrong to assume that all students who do not complete the course or fail to sit the final examination have gained nothing from their participation. Evidence from the interviews with language learners carried out for this case study suggests that some students never intended to engage in summative assessment, while others confirmed that they

were still satisfied with the progress they have made despite not submitting all items of assessment. (Skrandies, 2016, p. 9)

Participants in IWLPs in the United Kingdom (Skrandies, 2016; UCML AULC, 2022) also display, on average, a higher level of linguistic diversity than the student body as a whole, with speakers of English as a first language underrepresented.

While many universities in Anglophone contexts offer IWLPs, only two Irish universities currently do so. One university offers language electives in the form of five credit language modules in 14 languages that students may take as part of their main degree provided their degree allows for this (<https://www.ucd.ie/alc/>). A second university in Ireland facilitates the study of either five or ten credits of language in years two and three of undergraduate programmes as part of its electives programme which comprises 44 optional modules (https://www.tcd.ie/trinity_electives/electives/).

Case-study: piloting an IWLP

The HEI in which this case study is situated offers six languages: Chinese, English (to Speakers of Other Languages), French, German, Japanese and Spanish on its specialist postgraduate and undergraduate degrees. The department also offers French, German and Spanish with a second discipline as part of an arts programme as well as contributing to cross faculty undergraduate programmes in business and education. As part of a wider government initiative, which supported the creation of a range of new undergraduate programmes across the university, the HEI decided to pilot an IWLP for the students on these new programmes. The languages department was responsible for designing and implementing the IWLP.

Core design principles

In the first year of the pilot, decisions were made regarding the languages to be offered and the levels at which they should be offered. Recruitment of a Programme Lead (this paper's second author) and Programme Team comprising seven International Language Tutors corresponding to the seven languages offered on the IWLP was completed. It was decided that while the language modules should be optional, they would not be electives in that they would not be offered instead of other modules on the students' main degree. The reason for this was the intensive nature of the new degree programmes and the lack of space for elective modules.

In recognition of the importance to students of certification of their language competency and to incentivise participation, it was also decided that, on graduation, the students would receive a second transcript listing language modules passed. In addition, in order to remove any financial barriers to participation, the language modules were offered free of charge to the students.

The languages offered corresponded to those identified as significant for Ireland's future skills needs (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2012), i.e. French, German, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic and Russian, with the programme designed to allow for the addition of languages, such as Portuguese.

In order to avoid timetabling clashes with modules on the main degree programmes, language modules were delivered in two hour blocks between 5pm and 7pm. All modules

were delivered on campus and a limited number also had a second online option where numbers and demand warranted this.¹ The online option offered the contact hours primarily via the Zoom platform in combination with occasional sessions on campus. Course materials, including interactive online exercises and some recordings of face to face class contact hours were provided within the HEI's VLE.

Level B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) is commonly seen as the benchmark for independent language use. Therefore, it was decided to offer nine levels of the languages on the IWLP (Figure 2). This ensured that the relatively large cohort of students, entering the university with an intermediate language to Leaving Certificate level (A2.2), who successfully completed all five semesters of language open to them on a standard undergraduate degree, would emerge with a B2.1/B2.2 level in their chosen language.

Students were given the opportunity to move within levels in the early weeks of the semester. Information and orientation sessions, as well as placement tests were held during the semester prior to the first iteration of the programme. The language modules were then opened to first year students from their second semester.

An eclectic pedagogical approach drawing on a range of contemporary approaches in applied linguistics underpinned the programme. The modules were highly interactive as the majority of students took them in the evenings, often following a day studying their main discipline(s). Ongoing continuous assessment, including portfolio-based assessment replaced terminal examinations. A strong focus was placed on both productive and receptive group activities as well as task based learning. Modifications to the initial syllabus were encouraged throughout the semesters based on student needs and interests particularly as they related to their main degree.

Proficiency Level / Module number	CEFR Level
1	A1.1
2	A1.2
3	A2.1
4	A2.2
5	B1.1
6	B1.2
7	B1+
8	B2.1
9	B2.1/B2.2

Figure 2. IWLP language levels.

At the heart of the programme was an interactive, informal space shared by domestic and international students called the 'Languaculture Space' (LCS). This was a café-like environment where the speaking of languages other than English was strongly encouraged. Informal activities through various languages took place throughout a typical week. These were student-led and where possible integrated into language modules.

French and Spanish were offered in the first semester of the IWLP. These are the two most popular languages in Irish secondary schools (Table 1, Section 2) and the Programme Team felt that there was likely to be stronger demand for these languages. Both languages were offered at Level 5 to attract students who had studied the language for the Leaving Certificate as well as those with some knowledge of the language, perhaps as a heritage language. Spanish for beginners (Level 1) was also offered. At the early stages of the programme, it was not yet feasible to offer all levels simultaneously (i.e. 1, 5, 7 and 9 in one semester; and 2, 4 and 6 in the subsequent semester) and to place students in the most appropriate level. This also proved overly demanding in the early iterations of the programme for the university registration system.² The second iteration of the programme contained continuing modules suitable for students who had started the programme in the first iteration, i.e. French and Spanish 6 and Spanish 2. Finally, in the third iteration of the programme, all seven languages were offered. Follow-on modules were also provided for continuing students (i.e. Spanish 3 and French/Spanish 7).

Research design, methods and data analysis

The study employed a longitudinal case study design. Increasingly popular in education and programme evaluation (Duchatelet & Donche, 2022; Hallinger, 2010; Venuleo et al., 2016; Yin, 2018), this approach involves the study of a single case, here an IWLP, as it evolves over time, using combination of multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2018). The study was based on data produced by the following instruments:

Firstly, student attitudinal and experiential data in relation to the IWLP was gathered via a focus group carried out at the end of the first semester and online surveys carried out at the end of each of the three semesters. The focus group was conducted virtually by the first author. An invitation was issued via email to all of the participants on the programme. Four volunteered to participate in a 45 min session conducted the week after teaching finished (Table 2). One of the focus group participants was enrolled on Spanish 1 and three on French 5. The following prompts were used:

1. What did you like about this module?
2. What do you think could be improved about this module in the future?
3. Please reflect on your experience of participating in this programme alongside your main degree?
4. Do you plan to register for the next module in the programme?

Table 2. Survey and focus group participants.

	Semester 1	Semester 2	Semester 3
Online survey	39% [n = 28]	44% [n = 8]	38% [n = 58]
Focus Group	5% [n = 4]		

Secondly, online surveys³ were created using google forms and distributed to the students enrolled on IWLP modules via a link on their VLE. The surveys contained primarily open ended questions which generated qualitative responses (Appendix A). Modifications were made to the survey questions over the three semesters of the study⁴ as it emerged that additional information would enhance the findings (Appendix A). The additional questions clarified the module on which the students were registered (Iteration 2) and the students' linguistic profiles and language learning history, as well as their motivation for participation in the programme (Iteration 3). Twenty eight responses were received in the first semester (39%), eight responses in the second semester (44%) and 58 valid⁵ responses in the third semester (38%) (Table 2).

Thirdly, the enrolment, performance and attrition figures for each semester were collated and reviewed. The focus group discussion and the survey responses were analysed by the first author using thematic content analysis (TCA) 'an emergent and interactive process of interpretation of a set of messages, with some thematic structure as the typical outcome' (Neuendorf, 2018, p. 206; see also King & Brooks, 2018). In order to carry out the analysis, the material was read and reviewed repeatedly by the first author. It was then coded into smaller units of meaning that had relevance to questions posed and ultimately to the research objectives. Repeated codes were noted (Appendices B-D) and the codes grouped by theme. Quotations which illustrated the most significant codes (in terms of frequency) were identified. Finally, the second author, who was also the Programme Lead for the IWLP and, unlike the first author, involved in the delivery of modules in one of the languages, reviewed and commented on successive drafts of the paper.

Findings

Semester 1

Seventy-one students enrolled on the programme in the first semester, 38 in Spanish and 33 in French (Table 3).

The participants were registered on a range of degrees across the university. For example, Spanish 1 contained students from 11 different degrees spanning engineering, science, the humanities and business, with no one discipline dominating as a source of students for the language programme. As Table 3 indicates, 45% of those who enrolled on the programme passed the module. The highest completion rate was on the intermediate Spanish module (Spanish 5) at 58% and the lowest on the beginners' Spanish module (Spanish 1) at 32%. The overall attrition rate was 55%. It was particularly high for the beginners' module in Spanish at 68%. The performance of those who completed the semester was strong with an average grade of 70%.⁶

Table 3. Enrolment, completion and performance – Semester 1.

Language/ Level	enrolments	Passed	Failed or did not complete	Average Grade
Spanish 1	19	6 (32%)	13 (68%)	65
Spanish 5	19	11 (58%)	8 (42%)	67
French 5	33	15 (45%)	18 (55%)	78
Total	71	32 (45%)	39 (55%)	70

A number of themes (Appendix B) emerged from analysis of the semester one survey and focus group data. These related to the pedagogical approach, the module content and the broader conceptualisation of an IWLP. In particular, interactive classes with opportunities to speak the language, continuous assessment and a friendly teacher were emphasised as some of the positives. A variety of modalities, tasks and activities were also important. In terms of content, the relevant and contemporary nature of the material covered was viewed positively by the participants. On a more macro level, many of the core design features of the IWLP appealed to the participants, i.e. the opportunity to take up or build on existing knowledge of a language in parallel with another discipline for a recognised qualification. Two participants described the workload as manageable alongside a degree. One participant commented:

It offered me a chance to further study my leaving cert language and offer a degree of qualification for my efforts. I enjoyed the structure of the module and found it enjoyable to be constantly learning about new topics in more ways than one e.g. written work, listening, oral conversations.

When asked about potential future improvements that should be made to the IWLP, the most salient emerging theme concerned the timing of the contact hours. This did not suit many students after a long day on a main degree (or alternatively no contact hours that day on their main degree) and in some cases a long commute. The issue of timing is also related, for some students, to the workload cycle on their main degree and timing of the submission of assignments during a typical week. For example, two commented:

The timetable placement, the late classes really took a dent out of my free time and the time I reserve to sleep. When classes ended I had to take later transport which was time consuming and left me getting home at a very late time when counting the length of my long commute as well.

The timings were the most challenging. Our programme is quite intensive in content and the class on Wednesday was in the evening of a day where I would work on all asynchronous content at home, it felt very intense and as we had assignments due in our module every Thursday and Friday, I had to miss some in person Spanish classes to help me get through. The lecturer was great in facilitating follow up content and videos but I missed the in person experience.

In addition, a desire for more opportunities to speak and to study vocabulary and grammar were both mentioned, potentially reflecting a more traditional expectation of language learning among some students. Instead, these modules used a lexical approach focussing on the development of vocabulary rather than grammar progression with the aim of consolidating existing grammatical knowledge to ensure it could be used while enlarging vocabulary.

All four members of the focus group and 75% of the students who responded to the survey expressed their intention to continue with the next module in the programme in the following semester. Those who did not plan to continue cited the work involved given their other commitments as well as the timing of the classes as their reasons.

Semester 2

Fifteen of the 32 students (47%) who had passed the first set of modules elected to continue with the programme in the second semester and three, with appropriate

Table 4. Enrolment, completion and performance – Semester 2.

Language/ Level	enrolments	Passed	Failed or did not complete	Average Grade
Spanish 2	4	2 (50%)	2 (50%)	71
Spanish 6	7	7 (100%)	0 (0%)	73
French 6	7	2 (29%)	5 (71%)	62
Total	18	11 (61%)	7 (39%)	70

prior language knowledge, joined the programme at this point. Sixty-one percent completed the modules. Performance remained strong with an average grade of 70%. Retention was particularly high on the (primarily online) intermediate Spanish module (Spanish 6) with all of the students who enrolled successfully completing the module (Table 4).

The student survey data gathered at the end of the second semester (Appendix B) indicates that, as in the first iteration, feedback in relation to the pedagogical approach, the focus on speaking, the variety of approaches, the use of the target language to a large extent and a friendly teacher were positive factors. The opportunity to learn a new language continued to be appreciated. Meeting new people and personal development also appeared as positive factors. During this iteration, efforts were made to deliver the classes earlier in the day, the various timetables of the groups permitting. Such flexibility was positively received and may explain why the issue of timing was not as salient in the student feedback. This may also be explained by the fact that most of the participants (83%) are continuing students in their second semester of the programme and are familiar with its requirements. Comments from the participants in this iteration include:

It is not a problem alongside my main degree, I just know I need to get better at my own time management. [Spanish 6]⁷

I loved this module and will always be thankful for this wonderful opportunity. It was hard to balance my studies with Spanish, however, that's because I'm in a very intensive course. The Spanish module was the most relaxing activity every week. It was lovely to get to know like minded people, and be able to practice my Spanish in a calm and fun environment. Looking forward to the next module! [Spanish 6]

Semester 3

In the third semester of the programme, the remaining languages, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic and Russian, were added to the programme for the first time. In total, 152 students enrolled (Table 5) and 65 (43%) passed their module with an average score of 70%. This 43% completion rate compares to 44% in the first iteration (and 61% in the second). The completion rate was lower on the first modules on the programme (41%) than for modules primarily aimed at continuing students (59%).

The largest numbers enrolled in French 5, German 5 and Spanish 5. The numbers on French 5 and Spanish 5 were 13% and 10% higher respectively than in the first iteration of the programme. Demand for Spanish 1 remained relatively strong but was 26% lower than in the first iteration. This may reflect the wider choice of beginners' languages available with Japanese 1 also popular. Demand for Level 5 in Arabic, Chinese and Japanese was not sufficient for these modules to run in this semester.

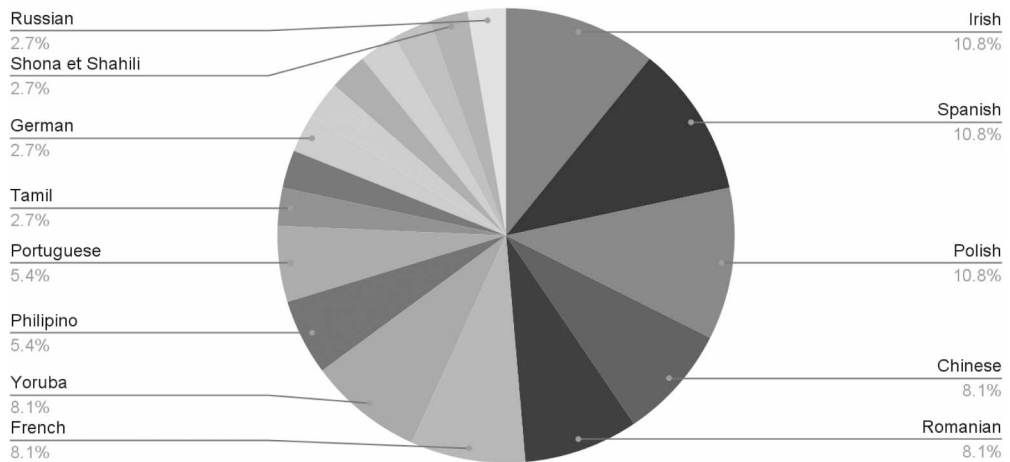
Table 5. Enrolment, completion and performance – Semester 3.

Language/ Level	enrolments	Passed	Failed or did not complete	Average Grade
Spanish 1	14	6 (43%)	8 (57%)	65
Spanish 3	3	2 (67%)	1 (33%)	79
Spanish 5	21	9 (43%)	12 (57%)	76
Spanish 7	8	6 (75%)	2 (25%)	72
French 5	38	7 (18%)	31 (82%)	64
French 7	6	2 (33%)	4 (67%)	80
Arabic 1	3	2 (67%)	1 (33%)	69
Arabic 5	1	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	–
Chinese 1	9	7 (78%)	2 (22%)	69
German 5	25	11(44%)	14 (56%)	78
Japanese 1	21	12 (57%)	9 (33%)	70
Japanese 5	1	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	–
Russian 1	4	3 (75%)	1 (100%)	82
Russian 5	1	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	35
Total	152	65 (43%)	87 (57%)	70

In this iteration, participants were also asked to reflect for the first time in the survey upon their previous experiences with language. The responses revealed that 60% of the 58 respondents speak languages other than English at home (Figure 3).

Fourteen percent elected to study a language they spoke at home, 44% started a new language and 42% continued with a language they had studied at school. The fact that the smallest of these cohorts continued with the study of the home language may be owing to the fact that the home languages do not always align with the languages offered on the programme. It may also be that this option needs further explanation at information and orientation sessions. This, together with taster sessions for home languages, is planned for the next semester of the IWLP. Sample comments from the participants in relation to their linguistic profiles include:

English is my first language, however having attended school at primary and secondary level through the Irish language, I became fluent in the Irish language very quickly, and achieved a H1 at Leaving Cert level. My family has owned a mobile home on the west coast of France

**Figure 3.** Languages other than English spoken at home.

since 2003, and I have therefore spent all of my holidays in the Charente Maritime in France. This immersion since birth has resulted in me developing fluency in the language, as well as a passion for the French language and culture. I now spend as much time as possible watching, reading and listening in French to continue to enhance my fluency. [French 5]

I speak Cantonese at home, I was born in Ireland so English is my mother tongue. I learned German, French and Irish in primary and secondary school. I learned Russian in college as part of this programme. [Russian 1]

An additional question added during this iteration aimed to uncover the participants' motivations for participation in the programme. Responses (Appendix D) indicate that it was important to the participants to continue to study a language in which they had already invested time and effort and improve or at least maintain their proficiency. Of this cohort, five also emphasised the importance of language for future careers.⁸ One planned to spend a year studying in a country where the language was spoken and a second was keen to experience another approach to language teaching and learning, with a participant commenting:

I loved learning german in school so I wanted to continue my education of the language. I also thought getting a better level of german would give me a greater range of opportunities in the future. [German 5]

A second group was keen to learn a new language. Reasons given were interest in the language followed by enhanced career opportunities and a desire to understand media in the language. In the words of one:

I participated since I was already interested in learning Japanese because I consume a lot of Japanese media and want to travel to Japan one day. I also thought it would be a way to have a break from all the maths and science based stuff that I'm learning in my course. [Japanese 1]

The remaining themes dealt with socialising, the development of additional skills, to obtain a formal qualification and a desire for new experiences. The fact that the programme was free of charge was mentioned by three participants but always in tandem with at least one of the previous points.

In terms of what they liked about their module, many of the emerging themes echoed those from previous iterations with some new elements appearing (Appendix D). Most salient in terms of what the students liked was the interactive and engaging nature of the classes with a focus on communication and combined with a positive view of the teacher. The enjoyable aspect of the modules remains to the fore and the lack of stress which partly appears to relate to the nature of the assessment. One participant commented:

I liked the lecturer who was one of the best lecturers that I have ever had as a language mentor because his personality and effort to make the class enjoyable and interesting is well conveyed to the students. I liked his teaching methods and the topics he proposed as a first encounter with the language. I am now able to communicate and especially read a plethora of words and I believe it is amazing. [Japanese 1]

New issues raised in this iteration reflect the fact that some respondents are progressing through the modules. For example, three respondents commented on improvements in their proficiency. Additional new comments included praise for the online support materials and the fact that students were laying a foundation for their future language

learning. Praise for the time of the class also appears for the first time potentially reflecting efforts to move classes to more optimal times, timetables permitting.

In terms of what could be improved, again several new elements appeared compared with the first and second iterations. As well as a call for more group work by one student, there were also requests for telecollaboration, more quizzes and more games.. Eight students requested more grammar, perhaps indicating that an embedded approach to the study of grammar is not recognised as such by participants and potentially needs to be highlighted by the tutors. The timing of the contact hours and the time commitment required also remains an issue for some. The flexible approach to the completion of work outside of class ameliorated this somewhat. It nonetheless posed a problem for some and necessitated the development of time management skills. Comments include:

I've enjoyed it overall but I feel as though I'm prioritising my main course a whole lot more and kinda have it as a secondary thing but I really do want to learn this language so I feel bad about doing that. [Japanese 1]

I liked how the language module stimulated a different part of my brain from my main degree. I didn't like how I would often have to neglect studying material for the language module in favor of doing work for my main degree. [Japanese 1]

Eight students called for more contact hours per week. Perhaps reflecting the increasing complexity of the programme, others requested a Programme Handbook, more precise placement in the correct level, and clarity on the registration process which had proven particularly challenging in this iteration. Trips, information on study abroad and a Summer Camp were also suggested.

In terms of the IWLP design, the focus in the responses echoed that of previous iterations and was on the fact that the option to study a language in a relaxed, engaging environment offered a change from the study of the main degree, increased future opportunities for work and travel and the opportunity to meet new people:

It is very relaxed and there was no pressure, a small group of lovely people and a great teacher made it very good to me. It was a bit stressful to balance the other subjects as well but that is due to my own shortcomings, nothing to do with the spanish program. I enjoyed my time doing the spanish course and having a hybrid system was ideal for these meetings as i would either be able to stay back after class to attend or i could go home early and do it online if i only had one lab to do that day. [Spanish 5]

I found the experience a positive one. The workload did not interfere with my main degree and finding time for the programme was not an issue. The positives were of course that I was able to learn more Spanish in a good environment and there were no real negatives at all. [Spanish 5]

Ninety-five percent of the respondents to the survey planned to continue with the programme. Of those who do not plan to continue, the time commitment (1), timing of the classes (1) and an upcoming work placement (1) were cited as reasons. Two commented that the 'more fluid' pedagogical approach did not suit them.

Discussion and concluding comments

Designing and delivering an IWLP is a complex undertaking requiring considerable commitment both from its designers and from administrative support units in a HEI. The study

reported on in this paper reviews this process over three university semesters particularly in light of national language policy objectives to increase the number of students studying a foreign language in Higher Education.

Many aspects of designing and delivering an IWLP derive from its optional nature for students. For example, learning from both this study and the literature reviewed above (Carson, 2010; Polisca & Wright, 2019) support the view that an IWLP should be engaging and interactive with a focus on communication through the target languages. In addition, an IWLP should be student-centred sometimes to the point of being student-led. The findings from this study indicate that continuous assessment rather than terminal examinations supports this pedagogical approach and appears to be more attractive to students. In addition, pedagogical innovation and 'risk-taking' in language teaching and learning is beneficial to ensure student engagement, particularly in Anglophone contexts where engagement in foreign language learning requires greater encouragement and incentivisation than in other contexts (DES, 2017; Bruen, 2021). Feedback in relation to these principles was overwhelmingly positive on the part of the participants in the initial stages of this pilot programme. Student feedback also highlighted the deeply significant role of the individual teacher in motivating students and ensuring the success of IWLPs and engagement on the part of students.

It was also apparent from the findings that the level of commitment required to study a language alongside an undergraduate degree programme does not suit all students. More than half of the students who enrolled in language modules did not complete them (with less than three percent of those who completed the language modules failing them). Echoing the findings of Skrandies (2016) and UCML AULC (2022), attrition mainly represents students electing not to continue with the programme. The most frequent reasons given were the timing of modules and the time commitment required. This finding indicates that it is important that the demands of participation in an IWLP be stressed to potential participants during orientation sessions while also emphasising the many advantages. Furthermore, starting an IWLP and not completing it is not necessarily a wasted experience for students. A deeper understanding of the nature of university language learning and the importance of time management skills where workload is increased represents valuable learning. On a practical note, classes can be filled to capacity at registration on the understanding that the attrition rate is likely to differ significantly from that of mainstream undergraduate degrees. It also appears likely that the attrition rate will fall (as happened in this study) for continuing modules where students are already aware of the nature of the experience and what is required of them. It is also likely that modules offered in a hybrid format, whereby students can attend in person or online, may experience higher retention rates. The experience with Spanish 6 in this study provides an initial indication that this may be the case.

For those students who flourish on an IWLP, it is an extremely positive experience. Many express gratitude for the experience and delight in being able to continue with the study of a language from school or to take up a new language. Others revel in the opportunity to study a home language more formally.

Approximately 12% of the students who were eligible to register for this IWLP did so in the third iteration of the programme, with 43% completing the modules successfully. Given that these are non-specialist language learners, this figure represents a

significant addition to the approximately 4% of university students who are currently studying languages as part of their main degree in Ireland. Thus, the findings suggest that an IWLP designed bearing the above principles in mind is one way to achieve the national policy objective of increasing the numbers studying courses with a language component after secondary school from 4% to 12% by 2022, and to 20% by 2026 (Introduction). The percentage of students completing the programme of modules will emerge as the programme continues. However, regardless of its size, any cohort graduating with fluency in a language and expertise in another discipline will be ideally positioned to contribute to the Irish economy and Irish society and culture. For those who complete only one or two modules, the length of time studying a language within the education system will nonetheless have been extended beyond secondary school and levels of proficiency in a greater range of languages will have been increased.

There were, however, limitations to this research. The questions in the online survey resulted in some repetition in the responses. This was retained in the analysis in order to avoid omitting important information. The timing of the online survey meant that those who responded tended to have completed the modules. It was more difficult to gather the views of those who were no longer engaged with the modules or had never attended a module despite their initial registration. In addition, the focus group would have benefitted from a larger number of participants. Future studies could address this by surveying students earlier in the semester or finding alternative ways to elicit their views, and by having more and larger focus groups. The study nonetheless provides insights into the characteristics of an IWLP capable of contributing to the achievement of language policy objectives related to university language learning in an Anglophone environment.

Notes

1. Modules with an online option included French 5 and Spanish 5 (Iterations 1 and 3), Spanish 6 was delivered online only (Iteration 2).
2. The Student Information System at the HEI was undergoing an upgrade at the time of this study with the changes likely to result in greater flexibility with regard to future registration and programme structures.
3. Ethical permission for the surveys and the focus group was obtained from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (F-REC) of the HEI [Approval Number: DCU-FHSS-2022-019]. Participants in both the surveys and the focus group received Plain Language Statements (PLSs) and completed Informed Consent Forms in advance of their participation.
4. Permission was obtained from F-REC for the modifications to the questions.
5. One participant failed to indicate, in the third iteration, that, having read the PLS, they agreed to participate in the study. Therefore their data was excluded.
6. In the HEI, 0–39 represents a failing grade, 40–49 a Pass, 50–59 Second Class Honours, Grade 2, 60–69, Second Class Honours, Grade 1, and 70–100, First Class Honours.
7. An additional question added in the second iteration asking participants to indicate the module in which they had enrolled allowed the comments to be associated with particular modules.
8. This related to German for Engineering, Japanese for Engineering and Chemical Sciences, and Chinese for Business.
9. The topics appearing in italics were new in that they were not mentioned by participants in iterations one and two.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendices

Appendix A

Survey Questions

Semester 1 Survey Questions• What did you like about this module?• What do you think could be improved about this module in the future?• Please reflect briefly on your experience of participating in the Language & Culture (L&C) Programme by taking this language module alongside your main degree. What was positive or negative about this experience?• Do you plan to register for the next module in the L&C Programme?• If you answered 'no' to the previous question, please explain why you do not plan to continue with the programme.

Semester 2 Survey Questions: Additional question• What module did you take on the L&C Programme?

Semester 3 Survey Questions: Additional questions• Please tell us briefly about your language learning background, i.e. what language(s) do you speak at home, what language(s) did you learn in school or outside of school, and anything else about your language learning that you think is relevant.• Why did you decide to participate in the L&C Programme?

Appendix B

Output from the Thematic Content Analysis of survey responses and focus group – Iteration 1, n = 28

What did you like about this module?

Pedagogical approach (to teaching and assessment)
*Continuous assessment instead of exams / the E-Portfolio (4)**
Interactive classes (4)
Plenty of practice speaking the language (3)
Teacher (helpful, friendly) (3)
Group work (3)
Variety of modalities, oral, aural, written (2)
Target language spoken a lot (2)
Presentations (1)
Tasks (1)
No textbook (1)
Fun (1)
Course content
Practical 'applied' language, but not too easy (5)
Learning slang (2)
Topics (2)
Workplace language (2)
Learning about different cultures (1)
IWLP design
Learning a new language (3)
Improving an existing language (3)
Combining language learning with study of another discipline (3)
Manageable workload (2)
Small classes (1)
Free of charge (1)
Obtaining a qualification in the language (1)

What do you think could be improved about this module in the future?

Pedagogical approach
More group work (1)
Course content
More speaking (3)
More vocabulary (1)
More grammar (1)
IWLP design
The timing of the contact hours. (20)
Bigger groups (1)
Record classes (1)

Please reflect briefly on your experience of participating in the DCU Language & Culture Programme by taking this language module alongside your main degree in DCU. What was positive or negative about this experience?

Pedagogical approach
[+] Teacher (2)
IWLP design
[+] Break/change from main degree/fun (10)
[-] Timing of classes (8)
[+] Enhanced career opportunities (language + another discipline) (3)
[-] Time required (3)
[+] Opportunity to continue with Leaving Certificate language (2)
[+] Opportunity to practice a language (1)
[-] Groups too small (1)
[+] Good balance of workload (1)

Do you plan to register for the next module in the L&C Programme?

Yes – 75% No – 25%

If you answered 'no' to the previous question, please explain why you do not plan to continue with the programme.

Time commitment (5) Timing of contact hours (1)

*The figure in brackets indicates the number of mentions.

Appendix C

Output from TCA of survey responses – Iteration 2, n = 8

What did you like about this module?

Pedagogical approach (to teaching and assessment)

Plenty of practice speaking the language (2)
 Interactive classes (1)
 Teacher (helpful, friendly) (1)
 Variety of modalities, oral, aural, written (1)
 Target language spoken a lot (1)
 Fun (1)

Course content

Practical 'applied' language, but not too easy (1)

IWLP Design

Learning a new language (1)
 Flexibility in relation to class time (1)
 Meeting new people (1)
 Personal development (1)

What do you think could be improved about this module in the future?

Course content

More vocabulary (1)
 More grammar (1)
 IWLP Design
 Should be in person (2)
 Bigger groups (1)

Please reflect briefly on your experience of participating in the DCU Language & Culture Programme by taking this language module alongside your main degree in DCU. What was positive or negative about this experience?

IWLP design

[+] Break/change from main degree/fun (3)
 [-/+] Needs time management skills on the part of the student (1)

Do you plan to register for the next module in the L&C Programme?

Yes (6)
 No (2)

If you answered 'no' to the previous question, please explain why you do not plan to continue with the programme.

Time needed (1)
 Timing of contact hours (1)
 Own level of Spanish too low (1)

Appendix D

Output from TCA of survey responses – Iteration 3, n = 58

Why did you decide to participate in the DCU Language & Culture Programme?

Continue a language / maintain & develop proficiency / not lose proficiency / develop aspect of proficiency (speaking (1), vocabulary (2), culture (3)) (30)

Careers (5)
 Erasmus year planned in country of the language (1)
 Experience different type of language teaching (1)

Learn a new language (22)

Interest (11)
 Future/career (6)
 Understand media (2)

Socialise/fun/meet new people (8)

Free of charge (3)

Broaden skills (3)

Qualification (2)

New experience (1)

What did you like about this module?**Pedagogical approach (to teaching and assessment)**Interactive classes / *class dynamic* (16)Teacher (helpful, friendly, *good, patient*) (11)*Engaging* (7)Plenty of practice speaking the language/*focus on communication* (7)

Group work (5)

Fun/ *not stressful*^P (5)*Could see improvement* (3)

Continuous assessment instead of exams / the E-Portfolio (2)

Course content

Topics (4)

Good resources on LOOP (4)

Learning about different cultures (3)

Solid foundation for further (autonomous) language learning after university (2)**IWLP Design**

Improving an existing language (6)

Learning a new language (2)

Meeting people (2)

Manageable workload (2)

Small classes (2)

Free of charge (1)

Time of class (1)

Combining language learning with study of another discipline (1)

What do you think could be improved about this module in the future?**Pedagogical approach**

More group work (1)

Telecollaboration (1)*More quizzes* (2)*More games* (1)**Course content**

More grammar (8)

More writing (2)

More casual language (1)**IWLP design**

The timing of the contact hours (5)

More contact hours (5)

Would like bigger groups (2)

Trip to Germany/Erasmus info (2)*Need clarity on the registration process* (1)*Programme Handbook* (1)*Placement in the appropriate level for all languages* (1)*Summer Camp* (1)**Please reflect briefly on your experience of participating in the DCU Language & Culture Programme by taking this language module alongside your main degree in DCU. What was positive or negative about this experience?****Pedagogical approach**

[+] Teacher (7)

IWLP design

[+] Break/change from main degree/fun/relaxed atmosphere (20)

[+] Enhanced career and future opportunities (language + another discipline) (11)

[-] Timing of classes (7)

[-] Time/commitment required (7)

[+] New people (from different courses) (6)

[+] *Optional homework/manageable/flexible workload* (5)

[+] Opportunity to continue with Leaving Certificate language (3)

[+] Opportunity to practice a language (3)

[+] New language (3)

[-] *No Irish* (1)[-] *Commuting between campuses* (1)[+] *Improved time management skills* (1)[+] *better communication with relatives* (1)[-] *Not in first semester too* (1)

[+] CA only (1)

[+] Unique opportunity (1)

Do you plan to register for the next module in the L&C Programme?

Yes 55 (94.8%)

No 3 (5.2%)

If you answered 'no' to the previous question, please explain why you do not plan to continue with the programme.

Time commitment (1)

Timing of contact hours (1)

Will be on work placement (1)

Would like more structured/'typical' language classes (2)
