

Twenty-Five Years of Language Policies and Initiatives in Ireland

1995-2020¹

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Abstract

Ireland is a multilingual country, home to at least 212 languages, as well as English, the Irish language - the oldest language in Europe still spoken as a vernacular - and our native Irish Sign Language, whose users' rights have only recently been signed into law. This paper will consider the main issues in language education in Ireland today from primary to third level, together with the economic, geopolitical and cultural forces which influence the ways in which we engage in communication both at home and abroad. Following a brief examination of the history which has led us to this point, it will review a number of European policies which continue to shape the manner in which both Irish and Modern Foreign Languages are learned and taught in present-day Ireland. Finally, it will assess recent policies/strategies² and initiatives published by the Irish Government, the strengths and weaknesses of language education in Ireland today, and propose some measures which could boost Ireland's national languages capacity in a world which, despite some impressions to the contrary, continues to be decidedly multilingual.

Key words: education, policy, Modern Foreign Languages, Irish, Europe

Introduction

Linguistically, countries are rarely what they seem, and Ireland is no exception. The Irish State is officially bilingual. According to the 1937 Constitution (Irish Statute Book):

1. The Irish language as the national language is the first official language
2. The English language is recognised as a second official language.

In the Irish-language version of the Constitution, which takes precedence over the English version, the emphasis in relation to English is quite different and a little ambiguous, *Glactar*

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² The terms "policy" and "strategy" are frequently confused. For the purposes of this article, my understanding is that "policy" is a road-map, whereas "strategy" outlines the measures taken to effect the "policy". The reader will note that the term "strategy" is now the more frequently used by State bodies in relation to language initiatives, even in the absence of a separate policy, which tends to be implicit in the strategy.

leis an Sacs-Bhéarla mar theanga oifigiúil eile [The English language is accepted as another official language].

Since the foundation of the State, therefore, the first official language has always been a minority language, spoken as a first language by an increasingly small minority (Ó Tuathaigh, 2015), although learned to varying degrees of competency by a significant majority of the Irish population (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2016). Furthermore, many surveys and polls over the years continue to demonstrate that Irish people have an attachment to the Irish language and feel strongly that efforts should be made to maintain and support it (Darmody et al., 2015; Kantar Millward Brown, 2019). The English language, which is spoken by almost all of those born in Ireland, is much less important as a marker of Irish identity for Irish people (Watson, 2008; Jung, 2020) despite a long and prestigious national tradition of English-language literature.

Over the past 25 years or so, Ireland has welcomed a large number of migrants to her shores, including many from non-English-speaking jurisdictions. As a result, the country has never been more multilingual. Census 2016 revealed that 612,018 residents (12.88% of the population) spoke a language other than Irish or English at home. That same census recorded a total of 212 languages used or spoken in Ireland. The latter is undoubtedly an underestimate, since new arrivals to countries frequently omit certain languages from their responses to surveys, particularly if those languages are considered to be of low status in their home country or if, for example, they are not written. In many ways, all of these new languages are hidden languages in Ireland, although, as we shall see, some efforts are being made at State level to support and foster them.

Ireland has a deaf community of about 5,000 members who use Irish Sign Language (ISL) ([Irish Deaf Society](#)). ISL, unlike British Sign Language (BSL) or American Sign Language (ASL), has the distinction of being a gender-specific language, as a result of the historical separation of the genders in the school system. The *Irish Sign Language Act, 2017*,

which was signed into law on 24 December 2017 and commenced on 23 December 2020, recognises ISL as a native language of the State and provides that the “community of persons using Irish Sign Language shall have the right to use, develop and preserve Irish Sign Language”. It also sets out requirements and obligations on public bodies for the provision of ISL services (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2020).

In recent times, ISL translators have had much greater visibility, thanks mainly to their presence on certain television news programmes. Those familiar with Northern Irish television will have noted the presence of two translators on such programmes, owing to the need to translate to and from both ISL and BSL, since Catholic schools for the deaf typically taught/ used ISL, while schools of other denominations used BSL.

One of the greatest challenges for proactive multilingualism in Ireland is the fact that we are also an English-speaking country. Although, of course, in many ways an advantage, the strong international presence of English has led to a high level of complacency in the domain of foreign language learning in Ireland, as indeed is also the case in other English-speaking countries (Bruen, 2021).

In the European Union (EU), the three procedural/working languages of the European Commission are English, French and German. However, German is generally recognised to hold this status (of procedural language) only on paper. Until 1993, French was the principal procedural language; this changed in favour of English with the membership of the Finns, Swedes and Austrians whose first foreign language (by then) was English. The predominance of English was further confirmed with the Eastern enlargement of 2004, since English was now the first foreign language of these countries, too (Carey, 2016). The departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union will do little to change the status of English. Of course, English is an official language in two remaining Member States, Ireland and Malta, and on that basis will remain an official EU language (European Union, 2020). Ironically, despite the fact that both nations account for just over five million EU citizens, it is the global

dominance of English, the fact that it is just about everyone else's second language and that it is a relatively 'neutral' language within Europe, having no colonial past there, that will ensure it will continue to enjoy the status of first language of Europe for the short to medium term at least.

English is currently the first Modern Foreign Language (MFL) taught in Europe and is increasingly used as a lingua franca in international communication. Unsurprisingly, over time it has also become the lingua franca among Erasmus students on their year abroad, regardless of their country of origin (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Llanes et al., 2016). More worryingly, host universities in mainland Europe are increasingly offering Erasmus students the option to take their courses through English, sometimes to afford their own students the opportunity to study through English in an international context but more often in order to attract more Erasmus/international students to their universities. This is particularly true of the countries of the less widely taught languages of Europe and obviously serves as a disincentive to English-speaking students hoping to improve their foreign language skills in the host country.

In Ireland, following what is sometimes described informally as "the Oxbridge Model" of language teaching, undergraduate MFL courses are frequently taught through English, something which is pedagogically questionable, certainly from a language acquisition perspective. Historically, university MFL departments were literature departments, whose principal *raison d'être* was to teach the literature of their particular target language. Language was taught mainly in order to access the literature. Although this focus has gradually changed over the years, some departments continue to place a greater emphasis on literature than on the language or indeed separate the two activities: literature lectures take place and are examined in English, while separate courses teach the language. Literature should, of course, form an integral part of any academic language course, serving, as it does, to enrich vocabulary and language and to convey an intuitive grasp of the associated culture. However, a considerable percentage of every year's MFL graduates opt to train as MFL

teachers at second level, where the curriculum typically involves no literature at all.

Language departments would claim, rightly, in my view, that they are not in the business of training teachers, nonetheless there is a disconnect between the experience of learning at undergraduate level and the career for which many graduates opt.

As in other Anglophone countries, its commercial and, to some extent, cultural dominance throughout western democracies, in particular, leads to the view in Ireland that English is enough and that there is no real need for us to study foreign languages. That is to ignore the reality.

Like all of its European counterparts, Ireland is a multilingual country, where up to 20% of the population use a language other than English on a daily basis outside of the education system, and where almost all of its children learn at least one second language at school. Yet it is perceived, not least by many of its own citizens, as an exclusively Anglophone nation and frequently behaves as such in international contexts. The challenge, therefore, is to develop and adopt a language policy which not only reflects the linguistic diversity of our citizens but which seeks to foster that diversity and bring it into the public arena.

What is the Point of a Language Education Policy?

As has already been mentioned above, the influx of migrants and returned migrants has increased the presence of foreign languages in Ireland, leading to much more acceptable results in foreign language league tables, where Ireland traditionally languished close to the bottom (Eurostat) usually in the company of our nearest neighbours. Nevertheless, businesses continue to bemoan the shortage of speakers of MFLs produced nationally (Department of Education and Skills, 2017, p.14): industries which require employees competent in foreign languages must continue to recruit abroad. This is not in itself a bad thing, freedom of movement being, after all, one of the pillars on which the European Union was founded, but

it does raise questions about the ability of the Irish education system to produce the kinds of graduates required by a modern nation in the twenty-first century.

Many companies find that it is usually possible to recruit elsewhere within Europe, provided that prospective employees have an adequate knowledge of English as well. But there are sectors which require Irish nationals, usually for representational reasons, and here we fall short. Although predicted some time ago, the print media have recently highlighted the challenges faced by the Irish State in ensuring adequate Irish representation in the European institutions, due to the numbers of current functionaries expected to retire shortly and the insufficient numbers being recruited at the more junior levels to ensure continuity. Inadequate foreign language competence is one of the principal obstacles in the way of those considering such a career. This may come as a surprise to some, as Irish is now accepted as a full official and working language of the European Union (since 2007) and can fulfil the second language requirement, an advantage which was not available to those about to retire. However, both levels of Irish-language competence and of a third language remain stumbling blocks for Irish nationals.

Brexit

The Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom and the subsequent departure of that country from the Single Market has drawn very little attention to language matters, although we note with interest the inclusion of the motto of the Irish European Movement in the preface to Michel Barnier's French diary of the Brexit negotiations, *La Grande Illusion* (2021), quoted in the original Irish, '*Ní neart go cur le chéile*' (Barnier, 2021, p. 23), as a reminder of the importance of our united efforts in pursuing our goal of a better world for everyone. That the quote was in Irish, a distinguishing cultural marker, is also possibly a way of acknowledging support for Ireland, one of the smallest Member States, as well as

highlighting the fact that the Irish are not English or even British, something which will come as news to at least some French readers.

In 2019, the British Council (Adams, 2019) reported that the Brexit Referendum was ‘putting pupils off ‘learning French, German and Spanish (in England) and that some parents were actively discouraging their children from learning foreign languages. The report also noted the perceived difficulty of foreign languages as a disincentive. More alarmingly, it concluded that children from disadvantaged backgrounds were less likely to take up foreign languages (Adams, 2019). As we shall see, this very significant fall-off in language study has been happening for almost twenty years, but the question of whether it has come about as a result of anti-EU sentiment or whether the decline in language learning itself has been a contributing factor to a certain level of anti-European sentiment culminating in the result of the Brexit referendum must surely arise (Lanvers et al., 2018).

Even if neither of the above is a valid proposition, in the wake of the British exit from the European Union, there is an opportunity for Ireland to re-examine its commitment to EU membership and how we can become more active members of the Union. A part of this re-examination could and, in my view, should involve a greater focus on a multilingual education throughout the standard education cycle and beyond.

Languages and Business

The fact that Ireland is English-speaking has undoubtedly been a major source of attraction of foreign direct investment here. The departure of the UK from the EU means that we (and Malta) are the only English-speaking members remaining, which should confer further advantage in a world where so much business is conducted in that language. However, a sizable number of business transactions require the knowledge of other languages, too. Business interests in Ireland have long highlighted Ireland’s poor foreign languages capacity

in multiple reports and articles (Irish Business and Employers Confederation, 2014; McHugh, 2019; Department of Education and Skills, 2017, p. 14). As has already been said, we are in a position to recruit internationally but this is not the answer to all of our needs. As in other Member States, our education system should focus on ensuring that Irish people who wish to engage in international business have the linguistic wherewithal to do so as well as a knowledge of the target language culture. Ignoring this issue means that we are not operating to our full potential and are constantly relying on others to mediate on our behalf, thus creating a relationship of dependency with our customers and citizens from other Member States and beyond.

Education

Finally, school principals have recently highlighted worrying shortages of language teachers (for both Irish and foreign languages). In some cases, languages are being taught by people without the requisite qualifications, in others, there is the possibility that MFLs could be dropped due to schools' inability to source qualified teachers (O'Brien, 2018; Department of Education and Skills, 2017).

The visit by experts from the Council of Europe's Language Policy Unit in 2005-2007 was expected to herald a new dawn for language learning and teaching in Ireland. Their *Language Policy Profile*, jointly published by the Council of Europe and the Department of Education and Science in 2008, recommended the following ambition:

..to move away from 'an official but lame bilingualism' to become a truly multilingual society, where the ability to learn and use two and more languages is taken for granted and fostered at every stage of the education system and throughout lifelong education. (Council of Europe et al., 2008, p.34)

There are few who would disagree that this aspiration is far from being achieved. Arguably, our levels of language competence attained through the education system have

declined since 2008. Then, as now, the chief priorities of the Department of Education and Science were national language policy and societal issues; the Irish language in society and education; language as a resource; national policy and European policy; the changing sociolinguistic map of Ireland; an integrated approach to language teaching; the future of Modern Foreign Languages in primary school; assessment for certification; support for languages at post-primary level; exploring the potential of immersion education and CLIL; languages at third level (Council of Europe, 2008, p.2). These priorities remain largely the same, although the sociolinguistic map of Ireland may have stabilized somewhat in the intervening years.

This paper will examine a number of policies and reports, though not an exhaustive list, and consider these priority areas, which have underpinned language education in Ireland. It will suggest some practical measures which could potentially lead to the realisation of the ambition articulated in the Council of Europe/ Department of Education document and which could address gaps in provision which prevent Ireland from achieving its potential as a fully participating Member State of the European Union, with a strong sense of its own identity, an ability to engage fully in international diplomacy and commerce, and a society where diversity is both valued and fostered.

Some Approaches to Language Policy and Language Planning

The areas of language policy and planning are, quite understandably, frequently conflated. As I see it, language policy is the explicit attempt to influence language behaviour, which languages are used, when, how they are used and by whom. Language planning sets out in detail concrete measures which seek to ensure that the ultimate aims of the language policy are realised.

Baker and Prys Jones (1998, p. 204), citing Cooper (1989, p. 45), define language planning as ‘deliberate efforts to influence the behaviour of others with respect to the

acquisition, structure, or functional allocation of their language codes'. They suggest that 'such language planning involves status planning (changing the status of a language within society by increasing or decreasing its functions), corpus planning (concerning the alteration or standardisation of a language to fulfil new functions), and acquisition planning (creating language spread by increasing the number of speakers and uses by, for example, language teaching)'.

Although these measures typically involve minority languages, I would argue that both status planning and acquisition planning, in particular, are relevant in policies which aim to increase the use of community languages and indeed foreign language capacity within a given jurisdiction. A further area for reflection when considering language policy implementation and attitudes to it are the three orientations suggested by Richard Ruiz (1984, pp. 15-34) which influence the nature of language planning efforts in any particular context: 'language-as-problem, language-as-right, and language-as-resource'.

It is reasonable to suggest that Ireland did not have an explicit coherent language policy beyond Irish at constitutional level until very recently. In the years following the foundation of the State, there was a strong Irish language in education policy, essentially Irish-medium education for all. This policy did enjoy some success but was abandoned following the publication of a flawed research project which purported to show that general levels of educational achievement were suffering as a result. Cummins (1977, pp. 121-129) argues that the early policy was in fact the correct one to underpin acquisition planning but that there was insufficient research available at the time to support its continuation.

A Brief History of Languages in the Irish Education System

The first record of formal foreign language teaching outside the home in Ireland is in 1858 when the Royal Commission on Endowed Schools urged that "a general system of intermediate education should embrace [among others] foreign languages" (Coolahan,

1981, p. 59). 1878 saw the introduction of Irish to the schedule of examinations under the title *Celtic Language and Literature*. In 1879, senior grade examinations were offered in the core subjects of Greek, Latin and English as well as the Modern Languages: French, German, Italian and Celtic. The 1908 *Irish Universities Act* gave us today's university structure and eventual language requirements for matriculation, which will be discussed later in this paper.

Languages at School in Ireland

Primary School

Irish

All primary schools are required to administer standardised tests in English Reading and Mathematics in second, fourth and sixth classes and to report the results to the Department of Education and Skills. Only Irish-medium schools (*Gaeltacht* and *Gaelscoileanna*) are required to administer Irish reading tests, although others may opt to do so. This is problematic, leading, as it does, to a lack of accountability in relation to the levels achieved in the language. Furthermore, several reports (Harris et al., 2006; Chief Inspector's Report, 2018), have concluded that many primary school teachers do not have the necessary Irish-language skills to confidently teach Irish to the required level. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that some of these teachers avoid teaching the language, as far as possible. There is therefore an issue in relation to the degree of access enjoyed by all pupils throughout the country to adequate Irish language teaching. This in turn creates problems for secondary schools in that Irish teachers are frequently faced with huge disparities in Irish language competence in the first-year classroom and many are forced to start almost from scratch to ensure that all pupils are given the opportunity to reach the required standard in the State examinations. All of this has implications for the standards attained at the end of the Senior Cycle (final two/three years culminating in the final School Leaving Certificate Examination), calling into question the merit of compulsory language learning. Put simply,

not all children of the nation receive the kind of teaching to which they are entitled or for the length of time ordained by the State. Compulsory Irish reading tests, as for English, would go some way towards addressing this problem.

English as an Additional Language

Guidelines for the teaching of English as an Additional Language are included in the Department of Education's *Intercultural Education in the Primary School: Guidelines for Schools* (2003), the *Intercultural Education Strategy* (2010) and the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (2011-2020). Typically, English language support is now provided by resource teachers at primary level, many of whom have received no specialised training in the discipline but who have, by now, acquired considerable experience in the field.

Modern Languages in Primary School Initiative (1997-2012)

This was the first endeavour by the Irish State to pilot foreign language teaching extensively across the primary sector. The initiative was financed by the European Social Fund until 2001 and thereafter by the State. Much good work was done in developing materials for the teaching of language and cultural awareness.

There were, as could be expected, several challenges. Lack of continuity between primary and secondary level was an issue: many pupils subsequently found themselves in first-year language classes with complete beginners, which was demotivating for some and which provided additional challenges for their language teachers. Others would have liked to continue with the language learned at primary school but found it was unavailable in their new secondary school. Anecdotally, teachers reported that the absence of a "fresh start" in learning a foreign language for the first time was a further cause of demotivation, foreign language learning having hitherto formed part of the new secondary school experience. In a limited number of cases, there were complaints of unqualified teachers attempting to teach the languages, leaving the potential for problems down the line.

On a more positive note, there were many examples of very successful outcomes, where languages not usually found on the second-level curriculum were taught and cultural exchanges were supported in circumstances where pupils would ordinarily have been denied such enriching experiences. Overall, the final report on the project (Department of Education and Skills et al., 2012) reported high levels of satisfaction, particularly in view of the limited financial support available. Funding was terminated in 2012, possibly as a cost-cutting measure but perhaps also as a result of a series of less than adequate performances in the OECD's *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) reports on core subjects (PISA, 2010, Cosgrove et al., 2010). The recently published *Modern Foreign Languages: A Report on the Quality of Practice in Post-Primary Schools* (Department of Education and Skills, 2020, p. 26), appears to foreshadow a change of direction: "As literacy skills have improved significantly, the consideration being given to reinstating Modern Languages in primary schools initiative is timely." On 31 May 2021, the Department of Education and Skills announced the reintroduction of foreign language teaching or Irish Sign Language from third to sixth class on a pilot basis. Described as "sampler" modules, pupils will receive one hour's tuition per week over six weeks at the end of the first term of the school year beginning in September 2021. Teachers may be recruited from within the school, from a secondary school or from the language community. This approach, although somewhat limited in scope, should foster greater language awareness and inclusivity, and a better understanding of our community languages, in addition to the stated aims of 'informing future developments in the area of language acquisition and development of the primary curriculum framework' (Foley, 2021).

This latter development is also very much in line with the objectives detailed in *Languages Connect (2017), Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026* published by the Department of Education and Skills in 2017, which encourages the use of languages present in the classroom in furtherance of greater language awareness and

inclusivity. The work of Deirdre Kirwan (Little & Kirwan 2019) and Scoil Bhríde Cailíní, Blanchardstown provides an excellent example of good practice in this area.

Secondary School

Irish is the only compulsory subject at second level in the Senior Cycle. However, the official position in relation to the status of MFL learning in the Junior Cycle is unclear. It would appear from the Twenty-four Statements of Learning published in the Framework for Junior Cycle by the Department of Education and Skills (2015, p.12) that foreign language learning has now become compulsory in the Junior Cycle. Yet the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (NCCA, 2015, p. 34) document *Towards a Framework for Junior Cycle* states that (only) “Evidence of learning must be presented in the subjects English, Irish and Mathematics”. Additionally, several reports mention the fact that some students do not take a language for the Junior Certificate. This may be because of special educational needs or for other reasons. Whatever the official position, in 2017, language learning was optional in 14% of second-level schools in the Junior Cycle (Department of Education and Skills, 2017).

If the NCCA position is the correct one, then Ireland is now the only country in Europe where MFL learning is not compulsory at any level of education. Until September 2021, Scotland was the only other country without compulsory MFL learning, but it has now introduced compulsory MFL learning in primary schools, which will teach a first foreign language from Primary 1 (aged 5) and a second language, possibly, but not necessarily, either Scots or Gaelic, from Primary 5 to 7 (aged 9-11).

As in the case of Scotland, for historical reasons, French is the dominant foreign language in Ireland at second level (as demonstrated by numbers of Leaving Certificate candidates), with German in second place and Spanish a close third (State Examinations Commission). In an effort to diversify MFL offerings, Post-Primary Languages Ireland has

developed a number of short courses, mainly offered in Transition Year (secondary school, year four, age approximately 16), as well as new syllabi for languages at Leaving Certificate in Mandarin Chinese, Lithuanian, Polish and Portuguese which will be examined for the first time in September 2022.

Another positive development is that Ireland is one of the few countries to offer non-curricular languages to the children of EU Member States resident here. Students may opt to sit for one non-curricular language based on the First Foreign Language final written paper of the European Baccalaureate in accordance with commitments under Article 149 of the *Treaty of Nice*:

..that Community action shall be aimed at developing the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of the languages of the Member States. (Article 149, 2)

These languages do not appear as part of the normal school curriculum but one of them may be taken by students who speak it as a mother tongue, has followed a programme of study leading to the Leaving Certificate and is taking Leaving Certificate English.

Languages offered in 2021 were: Latvian, Lithuanian, Romanian, Slovenian, Modern Greek, Finnish, Polish, Estonian, Slovakian, Swedish, Czech, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Portuguese, Danish, Dutch, Croatian and Maltese. Lithuanian, Polish and Portuguese will cease to be offered as non-curricular languages when they are examined as curricular Leaving Certificate subjects from 2022.

New Junior Certificate Curriculum

There is much to be optimistic about in relation to the new Junior Certificate Modern Foreign Languages programme. *The Specification for Junior Cycle Modern Foreign Languages* (Department of Education and Skills), based on broad consultation and research, is a fine example of good practice in the field. The *Background Paper* (Department of

Educations and Skills, 2015) had found that there was broad agreement on the changes which needed to be made to MFL provision:

Recurrent themes are: the need for an overarching national policy for languages; the need for diversification of languages on offer and greater choice for students; the critical importance of teacher education; the need for an improved, integrated learning experience for students; assessment methods, aligned to the CEFR, which will reinforce best practice in teaching and learning. (p.33)

These requirements have, for the most part, been addressed in the *Specification*, which focuses on three strands: (1) Communicative Competence (2) Language Awareness (3) Socio-cultural Knowledge and Intercultural Awareness. These strands are well thought out and allow for a focus on the classroom itself and the cultures therein, the cultures associated with the L3/L4, in addition to the more obvious goal of communicative competence.

Effective teaching requires effective assessment. Assessment for the MFL programme in Junior Cycle will be carried out mainly in house although a small percentage (10%) of marks will come from external assessment. The COVID pandemic has shone a light on assessment practices and in particular on the potential issues arising from teachers' assessing their own students for high-stakes examinations (Dempsey & Burke, 2021). While State examinations, as conducted until recently, are undoubtedly costly and require sophisticated logistical organisation, one of the most obvious advantages which they confer is that results obtained by each student are not associated with their schools or regions but only with the national examining body. Associating one's examination results with a particular school, whether privileged or disadvantaged, could colour the view employers or educational institutions form of the merit or otherwise of any given results.

Leaving Certificate

“The shaping influence of the university on the curriculum of secondary schools has been a perennial issue of contention up to recent times” (Coolahan, 1981, p. 110). In the

absence of compulsory language learning at second level, only the university matriculation requirements offer a degree of certainty that MFL learning will be undertaken for at least as long as those requirements are unchanged. Currently, all National University of Ireland (NUI) universities (University College Dublin (UCD), University College Cork (UCC), National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG) and Maynooth University (MU)) require a pass in English, Irish and another language in order to matriculate. Until 2004, these requirements applied to all NUI degrees, but over the years, in the face of increased inter-university competition for students, attempts have been made to erode them and they now only apply for entry to arts, human sciences, law, social sciences, commerce, medicine and health sciences, and some other degrees. At present, Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and the University of Limerick (UL) require a pass in English and another language (which could be Irish), while Dublin City University (DCU) and the Technological University of Dublin (TUD) require only a pass in either English or Irish. Understandably, NUI universities feel that the matriculation requirements as they stand distort the student “market” in a way which is disadvantageous to them.

Languages Connect recognises the role of the matriculation requirements in bolstering language learning at second level and the inherent danger in the removal of those requirements. It proposes that the Higher Education Institutes, together with the Department of Education and Skills, “will explore the issue of providing bonus points in Higher Level *Leaving Certificate* foreign language subjects in cases where students apply for HE courses in language-related areas” (p.33). Although a worthy ambition, this is unlikely to succeed.

At Leaving Certificate level, the fall-off in language learning continues, with only about 70% of the cohort presenting for the examination. In fact, numbers taking languages at Leaving Certificate have even fallen slightly since the publication of *Languages Connect*.

Languages and Third Level Education

Language teaching at university has a long history in Ireland. According to Coolahan (1981), the first language chairs in languages were established in Trinity College Dublin, with the chair of Mathematics and Oriental Languages in 1762. Two chairs in Modern Foreign Languages were inaugurated in 1776 and a chair for Irish was introduced in 1791.

Much later, in 1913, Irish became a compulsory matriculation subject for those born here. In 1972 and 1980, National Institutes for Higher Education (NIHES) were set up in Limerick and Dublin respectively, institutions which were later to be given university status and are now the University of Limerick and Dublin City University. These institutions were the first to introduce the concept of Applied Languages in third level in Ireland, as language study in university typically involved language teaching whose principal aim was to access literature through the target language. Following the model established by the NIHES, most Regional Technical Colleges (later to become Institutes of Technology (IoTs) and now in the process of gaining university status) also introduced modules and courses in applied languages or languages for specific purposes. A particularly interesting example was Tallaght Institute of Technology, which opened in 1992, some twenty years after the initial group was set up. Here, the new institution began life with a language policy which ordained that all students take a MFL, irrespective of their principal course of study. Unfortunately, this policy was abandoned about ten years later and, more recently, many other IoTs have all but abandoned foreign language teaching, despite the fact that some students achieved significant levels of competence therein.

It is very difficult to establish with any degree of precision which languages are most taught at university, since students may take a language to degree level, as an integral part of a degree, as a minor subject, as a first-year subject only, or as a single module for one or more years. As at second level, French has traditionally been the first foreign language taught at third level but now seems to have been overtaken by Spanish, as a result of the increased

availability of Spanish teachers in the secondary system, which has in turn come about, among other reasons, thanks to the availability of ab initio courses in Spanish in most universities and the perception among students that it is easier to learn. German still remains in third place and Mandarin Chinese is fourth.

Although efforts are being made at second level to diversify MFL offerings, this has not thus far translated into significantly increased diversification at third level. Mandarin Chinese teaching began at third level in Ireland in 2006 with the opening of the first Confucius Institute in University College Dublin and is now carried out in five universities nationally (Osborne et al., 2019). However, most attempts to diversify have taken the form of modules in languages for non-specialists and, while these are in themselves worthy exercises, they have done very little to increase our modern foreign languages capacity nationally. *Languages Connect* (Department of Education and Skills, 2017, p. 11) specifies as one of its key targets to be achieved by 2026, “Increase the proportion of the higher education cohort studying a foreign language, in any capacity, as part of their course to 20%.” Unfortunately, this aspiration appears to have been largely ignored by universities to date.

In the university sector, numbers taking MFLs remain much stronger than those of our nearest Anglophone neighbours, although this is certainly not a reason for complacency. Given the considerable increase in numbers of students attending university nationally, language-degree student numbers have fallen in real percentage terms.

European Policies and Actions

On 1 January 1973, Ireland joined the European Economic Community. As a schoolgirl at the time, I recall many discussions both in the classroom and in the media about the importance of foreign language learning in order to ensure that we could communicate with our fellow European Member States. Since the free movement of goods, services, money and people is

one of the principles underlying the internal market, the role of languages in facilitating this is fundamental. The European Union currently recognises 24 official languages. Although in the years following Ireland's membership of what was eventually to become the European Union (EU) individual countries, particularly Germany, did introduce various schemes for the promotion of their languages in Ireland, very little was done at policy level to increase our national foreign languages capacity. However, the introduction of oral examinations at second level³, followed by a concomitant move away from the compulsory study of literature, was a genuine attempt to present MFLs as living languages, much of the teaching (until then) having differed little from that of Latin or Greek.

The truth of the matter is that most positive developments in MFL teaching and learning in Ireland have come about thanks to the different initiatives proposed and often funded by the EU and the Council of Europe. The various courses in applied languages, offered principally by two universities and a small number of IoTs, usually combined with business degrees, were modelled on courses elsewhere in Europe which had begun to enjoy some success at third level, and were facilitated by the introduction of the Erasmus programme in 1987, allowing for interesting and mutually beneficial university exchange agreements. Over the years, interest in such courses has declined, in particular as Ireland's economy prospered: there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that many students were unwilling to give up part-time employment at home in order to spend a year in the country of their target languages (L2s), an issue which also impacts on the more traditional language degrees in terms of recruitment. These latter programmes now require that students spend a year in the country of the L2 and most students comply with this requirement. Nevertheless, there is a concern that the *lingua franca* of Erasmus students is increasingly English, that courses in

³ At second level, although they had been in existence in Northern Ireland since the 1920s, oral Irish examinations were not introduced in the Republic until 1960. It took another 25 years, before oral examinations were introduced for modern foreign languages in 1985.

host universities are offered through English and that not all students return to complete their final year with adequate levels of L2 competence.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)

Some of the most interesting and impactful work in the area foreign language capacity building has been carried out in the relatively modest Modern Languages Division of the Council of Europe. The most significant example of this work was the introduction of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (CEFR) in 2001, which has transformed language teaching and learning both in terms of reflection and practice, and continues to do so. While there are those who would describe the CEFR as ‘revolutionary’ the authors reject the term, preferring instead ‘evolution’ of practice (Council of Europe).

In 2007, Brian North (2007, pp. 21-22), one of the authors of the CEFR, set out for an Intergovernmental Forum in Strasbourg the three main objectives of the CEFR. The emphases in bold are mine.

To **establish a metalanguage** common across educational sectors, national and linguistic boundaries that could be used to talk about objectives and language levels. It was hoped that this would make it easier for practitioners to tell each other and their clientele what they wished to help learners to achieve and how they attempted to do so.

To encourage practitioners in the language field to **reflect on their current practice**, particularly in relation to learners’ practical language learning needs, the setting of suitable objectives and the tracking of learner progress.

To agree **common reference points** based on the work on objectives that had taken place in the Council of Europe’s Modern Languages projects since the 1970s.

Until 2001, neither language teachers, learners nor employers had access to reference points to describe levels of competence aimed for, achieved or required. The terms

‘intermediate’ and ‘advanced’, for example, were largely meaningless. At its most basic, mapping external CEFR reference points helps to address the issue of standards and transparency. In many ways, the publication of the CEFR in 2001 was really only the starting point for a project which continues to this day, giving all those who work on it greater insights into their practice, enabling learners to take greater responsibility for their learning and allowing for comparability between awards. The Council of Europe itself summarises the CEFR as follows:

It was designed to provide a transparent, coherent and comprehensive basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines, the design of teaching and learning materials, and the assessment of foreign language proficiency. (Council of Europe website)

The recognition of partial competences is another unprecedented aspect of the work of the CEFR team, reflecting as it does what is often the linguistic reality on the ground: in certain circumstances speakers of a language are not required to write; in others being able to understand the written language is adequate, etc. Interestingly, Irish people who speak several languages tend not to describe themselves as multilingual (or plurilingual) unless they have equal levels of proficiency in all of their languages (Pakarinen, 2020), something which, in Finland, at least, is less often the case.

While the CEFR is a non-prescriptive, dynamic tool, the flexibility that lies at the heart of it should in no way be confused with absence of rigour. The greatest threat to this very valuable learning tool remains a casual approach to its application and use.

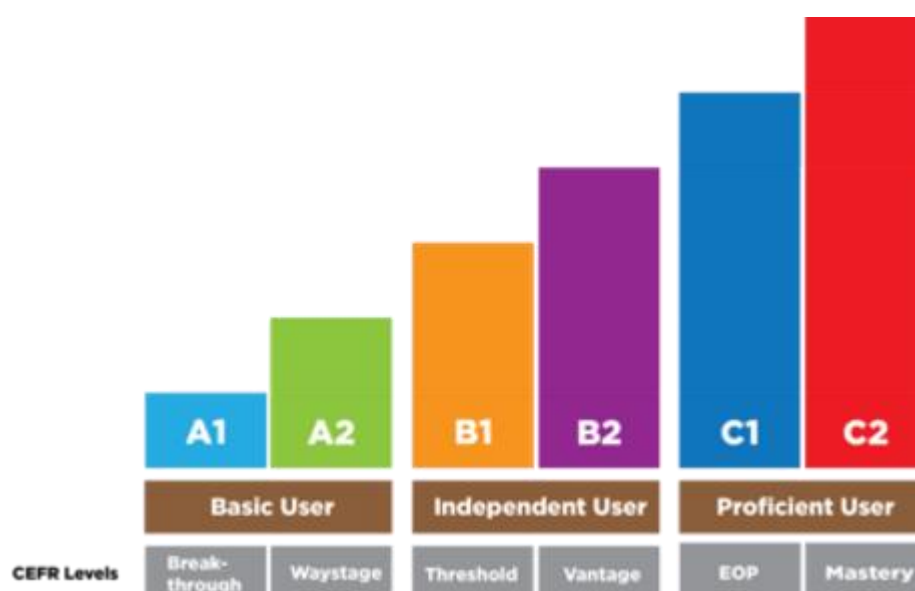
In Ireland, use of the CEFR was first introduced by David Little of Trinity College Dublin through the *European Language Portfolio*. It enjoyed particular success as an integral part of the government-sponsored *Integrate Ireland Language and Training* (IILT), a programme established to teach English to migrants recently arrived in Ireland. Maynooth University introduced the *Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge* (TEG) tests at five levels of the CEFR in 2005, which is now an entry requirement for certain university courses. Initially, some

traditional university language departments displayed a degree of hostility to any proposal to introduce use of the CEFR in university language teaching, sometimes because of a misguided view that it was unsuitable for academic registers. Nonetheless, work has at last begun on aligning levels taught, with one particularly impressive project being carried out in the University of Limerick. As has already been stated, we have much to fear from a casual approach to the use of the CEFR as evidenced by such claims as “students will reach C1 or C2” by the end of their (undergraduate degree) studies.

Languages Connect (Department of Education and Skills, 2017) aspires to link language courses at all stages of education to the CEFR and to conduct an awareness raising campaign among employers to enable them to express their MFL requirements in terms of the CEFR levels (p.20) (Figure 1).

Figure 1

CEFR Levels



(Eaquals)

Mother Tongue Plus Two

The European Union's stated long-term language competence goal, the Mother Tongue Plus Two policy, based on the Barcelona Objective (2002) (European Council, 2002), "is (therefore) that every European citizen should master two other languages in addition to their mother tongue" (European Parliament). This definition is elusive, which makes it easy to ignore. Firstly, the definitions of "mother tongue" are many and varied. Secondly, the policy has been clearly arrived at from a monolingual perspective, something which is out of line with the EU population as a whole, the majority of whom are bilingual (Grosjean, 2021).

Thirdly, it lacks clarity in relation to countries such as Ireland, certain Spanish autonomous regions such as the Basque Country (Spanish and Basque), Catalonia (Spanish and Catalan) or indeed Finland (Finnish and Swedish), all of whom are officially bilingual, as it does in relation to community or heritage languages spoken or used in the countries of Member States. The Welsh Government (although no longer in the EU) is promoting a more realistic Bilingual Plus One policy, also implicit in *Languages Connect* (Department of Education and Skills, 2017) to be discussed later. English is the elephant in the European languages room. Currently, English is the first foreign language taught in all countries of the EU except for Belgium, where it is deemed to be French. The status of English, therefore, is more akin to that of a *lingua franca*, with other foreign languages being taught in second or third position. This status of English as a *lingua franca* probably constitutes the greatest disincentive for English-speaking countries in learning foreign languages, leading us into a relationship of dependency when seeking to mediate the world, whether in commerce, politics or culture.

SurveyLang 2008-12 (European Commission, 2012)

The *European Survey on Language Competences* aimed to provide a key tool for European governments to use in developing language-learning policies as part of

the European Commission's objective to "improve the mastery of basic language skills in Europe" ((European Parliament, 2002) and "establish a linguistic competence indicator" (European Commission, 2002).

This tool would help governments to understand existing levels of second language proficiency and enable them to make meaningful comparisons with other countries and to measure progress towards the *2002 Barcelona European Council* (European Commission, 2002) Conclusions of achieving the *Mother Tongue plus Two* objective as described above.

A sample of almost 54,000 pupils (13-15 years) was tested in 2011. Each educational system tested the two languages most widely taught from the five tested languages: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. Testing was limited to reading, writing and listening, mainly for budgetary reasons and results were reported in terms of the CEFR.

The level of independent user (B1+B2) was achieved by 42% of tested students in the first foreign language and by 25% in the second foreign language. As already mentioned, in most education systems, the first foreign language was (and still is) English and exposure to this language through internet and other traditional and new media was higher than in the case of other languages. However, the project reported that even in educational circumstances where English was the second foreign language, performance in English tended to be higher than in the other language tested. It added that further evidence of the particular status of English came from the pupils' questionnaire responses, their reported perception of its usefulness, and their degree of exposure to it and use of it through traditional and new media. The Survey shows that for the first foreign language, the proportion of students reaching the level of independent user varied from 82% in Malta and Sweden (English) to only 14% in France (English) and 9% in England (French).

The idea of an indicator was eventually abandoned, ostensibly for reasons of sovereignty. It is likely that a language indicator would have resulted in an unrealistic objective for English-speaking countries. Since a significant percentage of students (aged 13-

15) achieved either B1 or B2 in English, setting a MFL indicator of B1/B2 at a similar age for the English-speaking countries would probably have been counterproductive in that it would have set the bar too high and therefore probably demotivated learners. Interestingly, B2.2 is the level of competence in the language required in Ireland in order to register as a teacher of Irish or a MFL.

Table 1

Percentage of students (13-15 years) in each country achieving B in each language skill (First Foreign Language) (European Commission, 2012)

First Foreign Language	Country	Reading	Listening	Writing
English	Estonia	60%	63%	60%
English	Malta	79%	86%	83%
English	Netherlands	60%	77%	60%
English	Sweden	81%	91%	75%

Language Policies in Ireland

Arguably, the strongest language policies in Ireland, on paper, at least, relate to the Irish language. These demonstrate a level of coherence not immediately obvious with regard to MFLs until recently. As has already been stated, the Irish language enjoys a special position constitutionally in Ireland, despite many concerted and repeated attempts to undermine this position almost since the foundation of the State. Since the beginning of the present century a number of legal instruments have been introduced to bolster and strengthen the position of Irish in Ireland. These include: *Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla* (2003)/ *Official Languages Act 2003*, which was enacted mainly to ensure the provision of public services through the medium of Irish, *Acht na Gaeltachta* (2012)/ *Gaeltacht Act* (2012), to designate, among other things, *Gaeltacht* Language Planning Areas, *Gaeltacht* Service Towns and Irish Language Networks.

In 2007, following years of lobbying, Irish became an Official and Working Language of the European Union, resulting in the need for large numbers of additional EU documents to be translated into Irish. Consequently, it has created many opportunities for those with high levels of competence in Irish. However, competence in MFLs remains an issue for Irish citizens (including those with high levels of competence in Irish) attempting to secure permanent posts in the EU institutions, although not an insurmountable one. Many high-level Irish-language courses have also been developed in response to both the *Official Languages Act* and, in particular, the change in EU status, thus enhancing considerably Irish-language capacity at postgraduate level.

In 2010, following broad consultation and international expert input, *Straitéis Fíche Bliain na Gaeilge 2010-2030 / Twenty-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030* (Government of Ireland, 2010) was published, followed by *Plean Gníomhaíochta 2018-2022 / Action Plan 2018-2022* (Government of Ireland, 2018). The former, which is described by the Department of the *Gaeltacht* as the (national) Irish language policy, has as its chief

objective to increase the number of those who speak Irish on a daily basis outside the education system from 83,000 to 250,000 and to increase the numbers of daily speakers within the *Gaeltacht* but also outside the education system (since Irish is a compulsory subject throughout primary and second level) by 25%. The latter is an implementation plan, produced following consultation with stakeholders, setting out concrete measures aimed at realising the objectives set out in the Strategy. Domains covered are education; the *Gaeltacht*; family advancing the language - early intervention; administration, services and community; media and technology; dictionaries; legislation and statutes; economic life as well as what are described as a number of other “broad initiatives”.

Language Planning for the Irish Language

In 2012, changes made to the Irish language curriculum at Leaving Certificate level in 2010 were examined for the first time. These consisted mainly of a reduction of the literature content of the course and its consequential downgrading in the examination, the removal of the history of the language and the history of Irish literature from the syllabus, and an increase from 25% to 40% of total marks awarded for the oral component of the examination. These changes, which were implemented with a view to increasing communicative competency - ie speaking- of students were not informed by any research on the subject. Subsequent research carried out by Ní Mhaonaigh in 2013 and 2017 found evidence of little or no improvement in communicative skills among those who had studied the new curriculum compared with those who had taken the pre-2012 course. As a result, students now completing the Leaving Certificate have had only a very brief encounter with Irish-language literature, something which some regard as an exercise in deculturation. Furthermore, these radical changes to content were made with almost no modifications to the structure or content of the oral examination, which is now worth 40% of total marks. Some test items, in particular the picture series, are not in line with good assessment practices (Ní

Mhaonaigh, 2010). There is also a view that the syllabus does not adequately challenge native speakers and those studying through the medium of Irish.

In 2021, the Irish language curriculum at Leaving Certificate is being reviewed, an exercise once more surrounded by controversy. At issue this time is whether a separate, very slightly more challenging, syllabus for Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools, should earn candidates bonus points in the Leaving Certificate examination, in line with the practice involving Mathematics and proposed by *Languages Connect* (Department of Education and Skills, 2017) for MFLs.

In keeping with the stated objectives of the *Twenty-Year Strategy for Irish, Acht na Gaeltachta 2012/Gaeltacht Act 2012* sets out provisions for a language planning process in the *Gaeltacht*, involving language plans for 26 Language Planning Areas as well as three *Gaeltacht* Service Towns and Irish Language Networks outside of the *Gaeltacht*. The intention is that definitions of the *Gaeltacht* will in future centre on linguistic criteria rather than geographical areas. The language planning process has a strong community focus and involvement.

The *Polasaí don Oideachas Gaeltachta /Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-22* (Department of Education and Skills, 2017) published in 2016 is a further step in the implementation of the *Twenty-Year Strategy*, which also plays a pivotal role in the language planning process in the *Gaeltacht*. The product of broad consultation and research based on international experience of similar sociolinguistic situations, its ‘overarching goal is to ensure the availability of a high quality and relevant Irish-medium educational experience for all young people living in *Gaeltacht* areas and in this way to support the use of Irish as the main language of families and of *Gaeltacht* communities’ (p.7). It recognises that the *Gaeltacht* is no longer a linguistically homogeneous area and that children come to school with different levels of competence in Irish and, in some cases, none at all. It will achieve its goals through:

- Supporting and improving the quality of Irish-medium instruction in *Gaeltacht* schools and early-years' settings, so as to ensure that Irish-medium instruction is the first choice of parents in each of the *Gaeltacht* areas
- Supporting appropriate Irish-medium educational provision for children and young people who are being raised through Irish
- Increasing the proportion of schools and early-years' settings that operate solely through the medium of Irish so that all students have access to Irish-medium instruction
- Fostering innovation and excellence in the delivery of Irish-medium education and in schools' linkages with *Gaeltacht* communities through the recognition of *Gaeltacht* Schools of Excellence (*Scoileanna Gaeltachta Barr Feabhais*) that may share their practices with other schools and become involved in leading communities of practice. (Department of Education and Skills, 2017, p.7)

Some Concerns

Irish is of course a compulsory subject throughout the Irish primary and secondary education system and, as such, enjoys a certain status within that system. It is also, as has already been stated, the only compulsory Senior Cycle subject. Notwithstanding the references to the language as a school subject in the *Twenty-Year Strategy for Irish*, which endeavours to confirm the special status of Irish, there is currently no stated Irish language education policy outside the *Gaeltacht*. This has implications for the future of the language nationally, as downgrading it outside the *Gaeltacht*, whether in curricular terms or pedagogically, will necessarily have adverse effects on the position of Irish in *Gaeltacht* schools, not to mention the sociolinguistic impact of such a downgrading on, for example, attendance at Irish summer colleges. The fact is that there is a symbiotic relationship between Irish in the *Gaeltacht* and Irish outside of it. As has been discussed, Irish has already suffered a “demotion” as a consequence of the matriculation changes recently introduced by DCU and TUD, where only a pass in English or Irish are now required. On the face of it, this is a clever way to effectively circumvent the Irish requirement, since all but a tiny number of courses in DCU are offered through the medium of English as are all courses in TUD.

Quality of Teaching

Irish

One of the most worrying aspects of language teaching and learning in Ireland, which concerns not just Irish but all languages taught, is that of teacher competence and its implications for quality of teaching. It goes without saying that most teachers are competent and achieve very satisfactory results in what are often challenging circumstances.

Nevertheless, numerous reports, both academic and of State origin, have referred to the issue of less than adequate teacher ability. By way of illustration, in 2006, Harris (pp.127-8) reported that 25% of primary school teachers were of the view that their knowledge of Irish was not adequate to teach the prescribed curriculum, self-reporting as ‘Weak second-language speaker’. In 2018, the most recent Report of the Chief Inspector included the following comment:

In the 2010-2012 period, inspectors reported that the quality of learning in Irish was satisfactory or better in 74% of lessons observed in incidental inspections with 26% of lessons as less than satisfactory. Despite a number of recommendations to support improvement in the 2013 report, no improvement in the standard of teaching and learning in Irish was noted in the period covered by this report. In the 2013-2016 period, the quality of teaching and learning was judged to be good or better in 72% of schools evaluated through a WSE [Whole School Evaluation] and the quality of learning was good or better in 74% of lessons during an Incidental Inspection. This means that it was less than satisfactory in between 26% and 28% of evaluations. (Department of Education and Skills, 2018, pp. 8-9)

As at primary level, findings reported in relation to second level should be a cause of concern, although some positive notes were sounded as well:

Challenges persist with regards to the quality of teaching and learning in Irish. The quality of students’ learning in Irish in Subject Inspections showed an improvement in students’ learning since the last Chief Inspector’s Report. The quality of students’ learning was judged to be satisfactory or better in 68% of lessons in 2010-12, and this had improved to 79% in 2013-16. Inspectors also noted a higher percentage of lessons (up 10%) that were very good and a matching reduction in the percentage of lessons where lessons were considered to be unsatisfactory.

However, learning in Irish remains an area of concern. It is poorer than learning in English or Mathematics. The proportion of lessons in Subject Inspections where learning was judged to be very good in Irish was 28% (compared to 34% in English and 41% in Mathematics). In addition, in 21% of lessons observed in Subject Inspections of Irish, learning is less than satisfactory. As at primary level, inspectors recommend more communication opportunities in the target language so that students have experience of speaking the language (Department of Education and Skills, 2018, p. 13).

Modern Foreign Languages

Two of the key publications on which the discussions leading to the development of *Languages Connect* (Department of Education and Skills, 2017) were based, the NCCA's 2003 Discussion Paper: *Languages in the Post-Primary Curriculum* by David Little (Little 2003) and the *Language Education Policy Profile, Ireland* by the Council of Europe and the Department of Education and Science, 2008, highlighted concerns over the quality of teacher education and the quality of teaching and learning of MFLs.

Key findings from post-primary subject inspections in MFLs, undertaken between October 2016 and September 2019, are presented in the most recent report on the discipline entitled *Modern Foreign Languages: A Report on the Quality of Practice in Post-Primary Schools* (Department of Education and Skills, 2020, pp. 8-9). Over the period in question, 94 MFL subject inspections took place in a broad range of post-primary schools across Ireland. In light of the concerns expressed above, the overall findings are very positive with inspectors finding that 'students experienced a satisfactory or better language-learning environment in 98% of the MFL lessons observed during the subject inspections conducted in post-primary schools.' Proposals for improvement included greater use of the target language in the classroom and suggestions that initial teacher education programmes consider including modules based on second and subsequent language learning, immersion and

bilingual education, something which is also recommended by *Languages Connect* (Department of Education and Skills, 2017).

There is no doubt that levels of language competence of MFL teachers have improved, thanks, in the main, to the Erasmus programme, which allows students to spend up to a year in the country of their target language. Many students benefit greatly from this experience, though, as has already been stated, they must sometimes demonstrate great determination to speak the L2 faced with the dominance of English among Erasmus students and the increase in courses offered through English in the host universities

The introduction of a two-year Professional Master of Education (PME) in 2014 has further complicated the issue of the supply of teachers of all languages. In January 2019, Carl O'Brien (2018) reported in the Irish Times on a recent poll conducted among principals and deputy principals by the Teachers Union of Ireland, which found that most schools had recruited teachers who were not qualified to teach the subject of their classroom due to the unavailability of teachers. The subject experiencing the most acute teacher shortages was Irish, but French and Spanish were also on the list. Reasons for the shortage included pay cuts implemented after 2011 but also 'the fall of over 50% in the numbers applying for (PME) postgraduate teacher education courses between 2011 and 2018.' O'Brien reported again (2019) on the issue, referring to the Department of Education audit (2017) on foreign language provision, which found that some schools were in danger of dropping MFLs altogether as a result of teacher recruitment difficulties. The audit found that thousands of children already had no access to MFL learning, although a class issue was also highlighted in that students with access to the largest number of MFLs belonged to the private school sector, something which has been the experience in the UK for some time (Wyburd & Chadha, 2006). The article also alluded to anecdotal evidence which blamed the new two-year postgraduate teaching qualification for the some of the difficulties:

Anecdotally, it says the fees and living costs associated with the two-year professional master's of education, which replaced the old HDip in 2015, seem to be having a big impact on whether language graduates choose to go into teaching. (O'Brien, 2019)

This anecdotal evidence has already been validated by a team of researchers in UCC and TCD. Mark Prendergast and his colleagues (2021) argue that progress made to date is being jeopardised by the unintended consequences of additional costs both emotional and financial. These unintended consequences in turn impact negatively on the attractiveness of entry to the teaching profession and thereafter on teacher supply. In the case of MFL teachers, it now takes a total of six years to qualify: three years at university in Ireland plus one Erasmus year in addition to the two years required for the postgraduate teacher qualification. All of this for a salary lower than that offered to teachers who entered the system before 2011 and little prospect of a full-time permanent post in the first few years post qualification. The same issues apply in the case of Irish teachers at second level, although most only take five years to qualify, unless their second subject is an MFL. It is really quite unsurprising that teachers are now in short supply.

Notwithstanding the hardship caused by the additional year of initial teacher education at second level, the two-year programme could have provided the opportunity to strengthen and enhance the language competence of graduates. As things stand, a good deal of the second year is spent in the classroom on teaching practice, not in and of itself a bad thing, but one does get a sense of a missed opportunity with little or no focus on the language or indeed on the discipline of applied linguistics. In an effort to address some of the issues above, several universities have begun introducing four-year language teaching degrees. Assuming sufficient time is devoted to the teaching of the language and residence in the country of the target language or in the *Gaeltacht*, this is a welcome development, and should allow for a more integrated approach to language teaching.

Perhaps one of the most positive developments relating to language learning in Ireland has been the increase in the number of *Gaelscoileanna* and *Gaelcholáistí* over the

past thirty years. The current *Gaeloideachas* [website](#) lists a total of 255 *Gaelscoileanna* (primary schools) in the Republic with 44,995 pupils, including the 105 *Gaeltacht* schools with a total of 7,166 pupils. There were 73 *Gaelcholáistí* with a total cohort of 15,483 pupils, including 29 *Gaeltacht* secondary schools with 3,909 pupils. Outside the *Gaeltacht*, these schools are usually the product of local grassroots initiatives, and the positive attitudes to the Irish language of parents and the communities from which they hail serves to create a very hospitable learning environment and explains in part the academic success of such schools. However, teacher recruitment continues to be an issue. The Teaching Council (2020, p.14) stipulates the following for Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes:

All primary level ITE programmes shall address: *Gaeilge* - Student teachers' confidence and competence in Irish, including oral Irish, needs to be developed to a sufficient level to enable them to teach the *Gaeilge* primary curriculum. This includes, but is not limited to language learning as part of the *Tréimhse Foghlama sa Ghaeltacht*.

Students enrolled in an ITE ISL programme are exempt from this requirement.

Although not stated above, any primary school teacher who has qualified in Ireland is, according to the Department of Education and Skills, fully qualified to both teach the subject at primary level and teach the entire primary curriculum through the medium of Irish.

Currently, Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) programmes involve as little as 38 contact hours of Irish over four years, in addition to two two-week courses in the *Gaeltacht*, patently inadequate given the requirements of the job. Some courses do include modules on Irish-medium teaching but these are, by definition, limited in time and scope.

On a more positive note, as part of the *Polasaí Oideachais Gaeltachta*, the State now sponsors two courses, one at undergraduate level (B.Oid) in Marino College of Further Education and a M.Oid in Mary Immaculate College, which are taught entirely through the medium of Irish, thus ensuring an increase in the supply of primary school teachers competent in the Irish language. A further positive step would be the reinstatement of allowances for teachers working through the medium of Irish in recognition of the

considerable amount of extra preparation involved in teaching through Irish, possibly linked to an additional Irish-language qualification.

In terms of actual language competence at second level, the Teaching Council requirements, as stipulated in the Subject Declaration Form, include the following:

Applicants must provide evidence of linguistic competence in the language. This can be demonstrated by:

(a) Applicants for whom the language is their mother tongue

Or

(b) Providing evidence of achieving a minimum level of B2.2 on the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (or equivalent) from the higher education institution where the qualification was completed. Alternatively applicants can provide certification of successful completion of an independent language competency test.

Option (b) is problematic. While some universities have a scientific basis for the evidence provided in relation to the minimum B2.2 CEFR level, others adopt a much more casual approach and make the claim that the language competence of their graduates, however poor their grades, corresponds to the B2 level. This was predictable, since many universities do not measure language competence in terms of CEFR levels, so that a degree in a particular language tells us very little about the level of language competence of the holder. However, there is some interesting work happening in *Maynooth University* and the *University of Limerick* in this area which shows great promise.

It should further be noted that *Languages Connect* (Department of Education and Skills, 2017) does not offer Higher Education institutions or graduates the choice between the two options listed under (b) but only an independent competency test, “in the interests of equity and quality assurance” (p. 21).

The Experience Elsewhere

As in so many other aspects of education, developments in language policy in the UK over the past 17 years provide a salutary lesson for interested observers. In 2004, the UK government decided that MFL learning would be optional from *Key Stage 4* (approximately

aged 14) in schools in England but that students should have an entitlement to study a language if they wished. At the time, the belief was that greater investment in MFL teaching at primary level would encourage more students to continue with languages at second level. This did not happen. Many schools stopped offering languages due to poor take-up and the budgetary implications of teaching very small classes. Language learning became a class issue with mainly independent (private schools) continuing to offer it. Jocelyn Wyburd, now of the University of Cambridge but at the time Director of the Language Centre at the University of Manchester, and Ameeta Chadha (2006) have described how, almost overnight, over 50% of schools in the Greater Manchester area stopped offering MFLs. Many university language departments also closed down in the subsequent years as a result. In Northern Ireland, Queen's University Belfast closed the Department of German and now offers only French, Spanish, Portuguese and Irish to degree level. The change in the status of languages in Northern Ireland has also had serious implications for the teaching of Irish, whose status was akin to that of MFLs in the education system, with numbers now also in serious decline there.

The New Languages of Ireland

In 2005, Gallagher (2006) compiled a list from various sources of the languages spoken in Ireland then (Figure 2).

language-as-resource approach and unlike the situation in many countries which host substantial numbers of migrants, the Irish government has set as an explicit goal in its language strategy to cultivate the languages of the new Irish (Department of Education and Skills, 2017, p. 8). Several measures have already been taken in pursuit of this goal: the introduction of non-curricular languages as described above, a number of short courses in some of our new migrant languages, as well as the diversification of languages available as full curricular Leaving Certificate options, including those of the New Irish. In 2020, Portuguese, Lithuanian, Polish and Mandarin Chinese were added to the list of curricular languages.

Languages Connect: Ireland’s Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-26

“We have set the ambition to put Ireland in the top ten countries in Europe for the teaching and learning of foreign languages, as part of our overall goal to have the best education system in Europe” (Department of Education and Skills, 2018). The first foreign languages in education policy was published by the Irish Government in November 2017. While this was a welcome development, there was disappointment that a decision had been made not to present an overarching, integrated language policy, involving all kinds of language teaching and learning and in line with recommendations made by various experts in the preceding years, including David Little (2003), formerly of TCD and the Council of Europe expert group. The plan outlines a number of Strategic Goals (Department of Education and Skills, 2017, p. 8):

1. Improve language proficiency by creating a more engaging 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.

The document, which is based on broad consultation within the relevant sectors and takes account of best international practice, provides a frank and honest account of the strengths and challenges in building a future with improved foreign language skills nationally.

As has already been mentioned, supporting the languages of children whose first languages were not Irish or English was identified as one of the main areas to be addressed in the consultation process leading up to the drafting of the policy and several measures are included to support and foster these languages and their attendant cultures.

Post-Primary Languages Ireland, initially set up to diversify, enhance and expand language offerings at second level, is now responsible for implementing key actions in *Languages Connect* (Department of Education and Skills, 2017). They have produced an excellent [website](#) and publish annual reports detailing work done, much of it at local level and unlikely to gain attention beyond the individual schools and their communities but vitally important nevertheless.

The introduction of the new policy could have provided an opportunity to address issues in the teaching and learning of Irish, Irish Sign Language and English for Speakers of Other Languages. Notwithstanding these reservations, the policy has much to recommend it, not least the inclusion of an implementation plan, timeline for the realisation of its aims and the fact that it provides the means for a cohesive approach to MFL learning and teaching across different sectors.

Taking Stock

Many recent developments in MFL, including the analysis provided in *Languages Connect* (Department of Education and Skills, 2017), are based on a **language-as-resource** orientation, indicating that the State does recognise the importance of languages, including those of the New Irish as stated in various reports and policy documents:

Languages Connect, Post-Primary Languages Initiative Ireland, Straitéis Fiche Bliain don Ghaeilge, 2010-2030, Polasaí don Oideachas Gaeltachta.

In relation to Irish, developments, particularly those under the remit of the *Department of the Gaeltacht* are more coherent, following the Baker model of status planning, corpus planning and acquisition planning. This coherence is much less obvious in the areas of Irish language under the remit of the Department of Education and Skills, in particular, the NCCA and the State Examinations Commission, as evidenced by changes to the curriculum in the past ten years and some assessment practices.

It is also clear that MFL learning cannot continue to rely on the NUI Matriculation requirement in order to guarantee continuation at acceptable levels. There is a real danger of language learning becoming a class issue, as has happened in the UK. In order to ensure that this does not happen in Ireland, we should follow the example of our fellow EU Member States in this by introducing compulsory MFL learning. Several EU Member States also have both compulsory minority language learning and compulsory MFLs. Being English speakers is a double-edged sword. We should consider how other countries, such as Finland and Spain, approach the teaching of MFLs and a national/regional minority language.

The fact that Ireland is now the only EU country without compulsory MFL learning reflects very poorly on our commitment to full participation as active EU citizens in the European project. Only compulsion can guarantee equality of access to a subject as has been demonstrated time and again in the UK. In the wake of Brexit, the principal economies in the EU are now France and Germany. It makes sense to focus more on the languages of these countries, while not losing sight of the need for a greater range of languages.

Teacher training at both primary and secondary levels is an issue in terms of cost, access, competence levels and supply. There are concerns in relation to the teaching of both Irish and MFLs, particularly regarding teacher competence in the case of the former and testing in the case of both.

Notwithstanding the above, it is clear that there is now a good degree of joined-up thinking and developments are, for the most part, going in the right direction. Very much good work is taking place on the ground and, as such, receives relatively little attention. There are grounds for optimism.

Looking Forward

The following are some suggestions which, in my view, would go a long way towards improving levels of language competence in Ireland.

Irish

- Compulsory standardised tests for Irish in all primary schools, to ensure acceptable levels of competence at the end of the primary cycle;
- The introduction of an Irish-language education policy/strategy outside of the Gaeltacht, in order to avoid disparities in levels of educational achievement in the language;
- The extension of *Scéim na gCúntóirí Teanga* (Irish-language assistant scheme) beyond the *Gaeltacht*; this scheme has already been in place for MFLs for many years, and it has had many positive outcomes;
- More interpreting at public events, particularly, but not only, from Irish to English, in order to normalise the use of Irish beyond the *cúpla focal* and to afford a greater presence to languages other than English. If we limit our experience of language to those who can speak English, we are cutting ourselves off from over 80% of humanity.

Modern Foreign Languages

In addition to the goals outlined in *Languages Connect* (Department of Education and Skills, 2017):

- Compulsory MFL learning, to ensure equality of access to the subject.

General

- An additional integrated language policy/strategy including Irish, ESOL and ISL, addressing areas of common interest;
- Improved language testing by following international best practice;
- Implementation of a Languages for All policy at third level, as advocated by *Languages Connect* (Department of Education and Skills, 2017);
- Use the extended PME to enhance language competence of graduates;
- Institutional language policies, particularly for educational establishments;
- A review of language teacher education;
- A national forum on all levels of language teaching and learning, to foster better communication and understanding of the issues;
- A national annual conference on languages at all levels, as above;
- A national body to guide and oversee use of the CEFR

Post Brexit, we should be demonstrating our intention to become fully engaged in the European project, without the need for mediation by others.

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