

## **Bridging Gaps and Building Futures:**

### **Establishing initial teacher education for Asian languages in Ireland**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper explores challenges and approaches associated with establishing initial teacher education for Asian languages in Ireland. This study identifies educational needs in the context of initial teacher education pathways through a three-year research project. It highlights the diversity in student cohorts, the demand for plurilingual and pluricultural awareness, and the need for alignment of teaching methodologies that would be effective in the Irish school context. Furthermore, it addresses the critical shortage of qualified teachers and makes recommendations for developing sustainable teacher supply chains. By analysing feedback from pre-service and in-service teachers, educational institutions, and policy frameworks, the paper aims to contribute to a discussion that would enhance the quality of and accessibility to Asian language education in Irish schools, ensuring it meets evolving educational and societal needs.

**Keywords:** language policy, teacher education, Asian languages, Japanese, Chinese

#### **Introduction**

Ireland boasts a rich landscape of Asian languages. The 2022 Census (CSO, 2023) reveals that 751,507 residents in Ireland speak a language other than English or Irish at home, with over 20 Asian languages identified. Chinese emerges as the predominant Asian language. It is spoken by 24,709 individuals, making it the eighth most widely spoken foreign language and accounting for 3.29% of the foreign language-speaking population. In the context of Asian language learning in schools, Japanese stands out as a popular subject in schools, boasting 2042 foreign language learners (PPLI, 2023) and approximately 2,063 individual speakers identified in 2022 (CSO, 2023). Ireland ranks first in Europe for the numbers of Japanese learners per capita of the population (The Japan Foundation, 2023), although this needs to be understood in the context of large numbers of school students taking it only as a Transition Year Module. Korean has 1,083 native speakers (CSO, 2023) and is another popular Asian

language offered as a TY module in schools with potential for expansion if more teachers were available. According to PPLI (2023), 408 students participated in the Korean TY module in the academic year of 2022-2023.

Eight languages have been identified as important for Irish enterprises to trade internationally, namely German, French, Spanish, Italian, Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, Russian and Arabic (Forfás, 2012). Some Asian languages are not taught because they do not feature in languages considered important for trade. The number of Malayalam speakers has doubled in the past decade, reaching 24,674, nearly matching the number of Chinese speakers. Other languages, such as Filipino, Hindi, and Urdu, also have substantial speaker populations, exceeding 1.5% of the foreign language-speaking population. Moreover, there are instances where different languages, dialects, and regional variations are broadly categorised, leading to a heightened risk of heritage language attrition. This is particularly evident when the word 'Chinese' is used to refer to different languages in this context, a practice that can obscure the linguistic diversity within the Chinese-speaking community (Diskin, 2020).

### **The provision of Asian languages**

Beginning with the European language education context, where the integration of Asian languages into educational systems reveals diverse strategies across different countries, the focus of this research then narrows to the provision in Ireland. It highlights the ways in which Ireland aligns with the broader European trends in the provision of Asian language education and sets the stage for the examination of Ireland's unique efforts and challenges in promoting linguistic diversity and implementing Asian languages within its educational framework.

## **The European context**

The 2023 European Commission report (European Commission et al., 2023) provides data on foreign language provision across 39 educational systems in 37 European countries, indicating that between 6 to 12 foreign languages are implemented on the national curriculum with state examinations available in most countries. English, French and German are the three most widely provided languages ( $n > 22$ ), followed by Russian, Spanish and Italian ( $n > 17$ ).

Chinese and Japanese are the only Asian languages listed, with both ranking in the top 10 most offered and tested foreign languages in the EU. Japanese is taught and tested in post-primary schools across 7 educational systems, while Chinese is offered in 13 and tested in 10. In certain states, such as Luxembourg, Asian languages may be offered as both a Modern Foreign Language (MFL) and as part of classical studies. In primary settings, both languages are mainly taught through Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL).

Regarding labour market needs, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report (Marconi, Vergolini & Borgonovi, 2023) highlights German, Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, and French as the most in-demand foreign languages other than English, required in 1-2% of all vacancies online across 27 EU countries and the UK in 2021. The report also suggests a broader demand for language and communication skills, often implicitly required or competencies that are assumed by employers.

## **The Irish context**

Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI), a unit under the auspices of the Irish Department of Education, supports lesser-taught languages such as Japanese and Russian, recently added curricular languages including Polish, Lithuanian, Portuguese, and Mandarin Chinese, and some extra-curricular languages including Romanian and Korean. A survey on language

attitudes among the public by PPLI in 2023 revealed that Spanish, French, Irish, German, and Chinese were the most popular languages for learning, with Chinese's significance slightly higher among parents of children aged 12-17 (Zhang, 2023).

In the Irish school context, Asian languages provision typically includes Japanese, Chinese, and Korean. 2024 marks two decades since the introduction of Japanese to the Leaving Certificate curriculum. Mandarin Chinese was added into the Leaving Certificate curriculum in 2020, following the identification of its importance for Ireland's future skill needs in trade (Forfás, 2012) and in education (DoE, 2017). The Korean Transition Year unit was introduced in 2018 and has proven extremely popular. According to PPLI's 2023 annual report (PPLI, 2024), 2,610 students were learning Japanese, 1,856 were studying Chinese, and 447 were enrolled in the Korean Transition Year module.

In relation to Chinese provision, three Confucius Institutes also provide courses, mainly as Transition Year modules delivered by visiting tutors. Osborne, Zhang, and Xia (2019) reported that over ten thousand students across more than 150 post-primary schools were learning Chinese through these courses in 2016. Another Confucius Institute was established at the University of Galway in 2019.

### **Relevant policies in Ireland**

Several recently published policies are set to influence the advancement of Asian language education in Ireland. Within the realm of primary education, the new *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2020a) advocates for the introduction of modern foreign languages at stages 3 and 4 (third to sixth class). Aligning with the framework's objectives, the inclusion of Asian languages is anticipated to enhance linguistic diversity and enrich the educational experiences of primary school students. An effective system of upskilling will be

required to implement this (PPLI, 2024) and careful monitoring of both pupils' experiences and those of the relevant teachers are necessary (Bruen, 2023).

At the post-primary level, the diversification of language provision is one of the four main goals within Languages Connect, Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education (DoE, 2017). The new implementation plan (DoE, 2024) outlines key actions aimed at augmenting the capacity and quality of Asian languages provision, alongside ensuring a sustainable supply of qualified teachers.

Furthermore, in the domain of further and higher education, Global Citizens 2030 - Ireland's International Talent and Innovation Strategy (DFHERIS, 2024) introduces flagship initiatives intended to broaden Ireland's international influence. This strategy recognises the imperative to attract and leverage the expertise of international talents, offering valuable perspectives on mitigating the qualified teacher shortage through a global and innovative lens.

### **The shortage of qualified teachers**

The demand for Asian languages in Irish schools has been on a steady incline (see Table 1), witnessing an average growth rate of approximately 15% between 2020 and 2023. This surge is mirrored in both the overall enrolment numbers (PPLI, 2024) and the Leaving Certificate statistics (State Examinations Commission, 2023). With an increase in demand a shortfall in the supply of qualified subject teachers has become increasingly pronounced. Data from the Teaching Council, the regulator of the teaching profession in Ireland (see Table 1) reveals that, two decades post the introduction of Japanese, only 15 teachers have been certified and registered, averaging less than one teacher per year (The Teaching Council, 2023).

**Table 1*****Statistics of recently added and lesser-taught curricular languages***

Subject	Leaving Certificate Statistics				Teaching Council Registration Statistics (as of 02/10/2023)
	2020	2021	2022	2023	
Japanese	267	298	271	312	15
Russian	395	474	419	521	28
Lithuanian			186	210	0
Polish			818	956	5
Portuguese			131	187	2
Mandarin Chinese			280	335	4

The scenario for Chinese, a more recently introduced curricular language, is similar. Despite the Teaching Council opening subject registration in January 2023, only a handful of teachers are in the process of completing their registration. Chinese teaching candidates, particularly those educated abroad, often face significant qualification gaps, hindering their effectiveness in Irish classrooms.

For instance, both Polish and Chinese were introduced as curricular languages in 2020. An Expression of Interest for teaching, conducted by PPLI in 2022, attracted 38 applicants for Polish and 19 for Chinese (Zhang, 2023). Among the Polish applicants, 73% were deemed qualified for registration via the international qualifications route with the Teaching Council. In comparison, less than 10% of Chinese teaching candidates were seen as potentially meeting the registration criteria, with anticipated deficiencies in a number of areas such as contextual knowledge of the Irish educational system, foundation disciplines and MFL and Chinese language-specific pedagogy.

Concurrently, the absence of pathways within the Irish educational system to accommodate and bridge the qualification gaps for Chinese and other Asian language teaching candidates with potential is leading to a possible loss of teaching and learning

capacity. An exodus of skilled individuals is a pressing issue, particularly for Asian languages, as well as for MFL and post-primary education in Ireland at large.

### **Research methods**

Road mapping for initial teacher education (ITE) of Asian languages commenced in 2020, leading to a three-year research project directed by PPLI, focusing on a case study aimed at qualifying Mandarin Chinese teachers in Ireland (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Timeline and research methods of the road mapping project*

<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Project focus</b>	<b>Methods</b>
Q1 – Q2 2021	Establish rationale for the road mapping project	Case studies
Q3 – Q4 2021	Conduct profiling of and identify educational needs of pre-service teachers and potential teaching candidates	Survey, interviews
Q1 – Q3 2022	Analyse context of ITE programmes, Asian Studies and relevant language departments in Irish Higher Education	Interviews
Q2 – Q4 2022	Identify educational needs of in-service Chinese teachers	Survey, focus groups, observations, reflective journals
Q1 – Q3 2023	Develop resources and pilot	Case studies
Q2 – Q4 2023	Consult on the needs and challenges of ITE and HEI stakeholders	Focus groups

The project began in the first quarter of 2021, with case studies to explore the pathways for qualifying Chinese teachers across several jurisdictions, including Australia, England, New Zealand, Scotland, and within China. By the third and fourth quarters of 2021, a national

survey was deployed to delineate the profiles of prospective candidates for future ITE programmes, pinpointing gaps in their training, qualifications, and needs in relation to becoming qualified teachers in Ireland.

In 2022, the focus shifted towards analysing the landscape of relevant Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), in particular examining the existing frameworks for qualifying language teachers through both consecutive and concurrent degrees. This analysis included the structures and learning outcomes of Asian language programmes within HEIs, identifying potential discrepancies between the learning outcomes of primary degrees and ITE programmes, alongside the additional training necessitated by the linguistic and acquisitional divergences between European curricular languages and Asian languages.

Concurrently, support continued for in-service Chinese teachers, identifying specific challenges and needs that should be integrated into ITE programmes or addressed alongside Continuing Professional Development (CPD). In the second quarter of 2022, in-service Chinese teachers were further engaged to articulate their needs in relation to high-quality teaching and learning, subject development, and effective integration into the Irish school system, particularly during the initial stages of their teaching careers.

Building on the first two years of research, 2023 saw the development and pilot testing of a bridging programme tailored to the needs identified by teachers and teacher candidates. Adjustments were made based on feedback from this pilot, ensuring the programme's alignment with the teachers' professional development requirements.

In a consultation discussion on an updated implementation plan for the Languages Connect strategy, ITE providers from Irish higher education and representatives from Asian Studies and language departments in HEIs, teachers on the frontline, and graduates of Chinese language programmes from Irish HEIs discussed some of the potential obstacles, and logistics of establishing ITE for Asian languages.

### **Educational needs of potential Chinese teaching candidates**

The initial survey conducted in 2021 garnered responses from 52 pre-service teachers and potential teacher candidates, the majority of whom were already teaching in Irish schools, either full-time (48%) or part-time (37%). The survey, supplemented by follow-up interviews (n = 13), established a profile baseline for individuals at various stages of their careers and education, all expressing interest in teaching Chinese in Irish schools. Analysis of the potential teaching candidates' backgrounds and qualifications, in relation to the Teaching Council's subject registration criteria (The Teaching Council, 2020), led to the delineation of five candidate profiles and the identification of six key areas of needs (see Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Profiles of potential teaching candidates and their educational needs*

Type	Contextual knowledge	Foundation disciplines	MFL pedagogy	Chinese pedagogy	Language upskilling	Language and culture awareness
Qualified teacher - Irish route				√	√	
Qualified teacher - international route	√	√	√			√
Graduates from HEI Chinese programmes				√		
Migrant and visiting educators	√	√	√	√		√
Other interested candidates	√	√	√	√	√	√

### **Irish teacher qualification route (27%)**

This group includes non-native teachers who are already registered with the Teaching Council or are in the registration process, primarily focusing on teaching MFLs other than Chinese. Comprising a wide range of educators, including active teachers, recent ITE programme graduates, and current students, this cohort may require specific training and support in Chinese teaching methodologies and pedagogy, alongside upskilling programmes to enhance their Chinese language proficiency.

### **International teacher qualification route (21%)**

Native Chinese speakers with appropriate qualifications and teacher status from outside Ireland constitute this category. Although theoretically eligible for registration with the Teaching Council, practical challenges arise due to non-alignment of their training with the Irish educational system's requirements. This group expressed a need for training on the Irish educational system context and foundational disciplines, and pedagogy to function effectively in Irish schools.

Additionally, further training in plurilingual and pluricultural awareness is deemed beneficial, particularly for delivering the second strand of the Mandarin Chinese Leaving Certificate specification (NCCA, 2020b). This is important given the educational and sociocultural differences between the potential candidates' training backgrounds and that of those educated in Ireland. In mainland China, English has been the predominant foreign language taught in schools. Leaving Certificate equivalent exams have been available for five additional languages including Japanese, Russian, German, French and Spanish since 1983, yet these languages were only officially added into the curriculum in 2017, with teaching capacity and relevant support under development (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020).

### **Graduates with Chinese language expertise (31%)**

Defined by individuals who have pursued undergraduate or postgraduate studies with a significant emphasis on Chinese language, this group possesses the necessary language proficiency and cultural knowledge, making them strong candidates for teaching qualifications. However, their academic preparation often focuses on communicative skills, lacking in areas such as linguistics, pedagogy, and language acquisition essential for teaching Chinese, which are currently not covered in existing ITE programmes.

### **Migrant and visiting educators seeking long-term roles (12%)**

This profile includes migrant native speaker teachers and visiting educators who have gained firsthand teaching experience in the Irish educational system but lack the full qualifications for official recognition. Predominantly part-time teachers, many are registered for Further Education but face qualification gaps for post-primary registration. Visiting tutors and language assistants looking to transition into full-time teaching roles in Ireland also fall into this category.

### **Enthusiastic candidates without formal Chinese or ITE training (9%)**

Candidates in this group show a keen interest in teaching Chinese but do not have a formal background in Chinese language studies or ITE training. Despite their diverse backgrounds and rich life experiences, which could contribute significantly to their success as teachers, they face challenges in meeting the qualification requirements for teacher registration. With appropriate training to develop teaching competencies in Chinese, they have the potential to become qualified and effective educators.

## **Challenges identified**

The provision of curricular languages in Irish schools is markedly unbalanced, with a scarcity of ITE programmes in HEIs that cater to Asian languages. The need for a consistent supply of qualified teachers proficient in these languages is crucial for schools seeking to broaden their languages offerings. Identified challenges pertaining to teaching, learning, and subject development are significant among frontline in-service teachers and relevant third-level educators in Asian studies and teacher education.

### **Access to the post-primary school system**

The process of registering and obtaining recognition as a teacher in Ireland can vary significantly for individuals trained in jurisdictions like China and Japan, due to differences in education systems, teacher training, and qualification recognition. This process demands a considerable investment of both time and financial resources to acquire necessary documents from overseas and ensure compliance with Irish standards.

Teachers have identified common issues when attempting to register as qualified teachers in Ireland, including the absence of equivalent documentation required for subject evaluation, such as degree programme module descriptors and indicators for the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). Additionally, some documents, including statements from teacher registration authorities on teacher registration status, can be particularly challenging to obtain in those jurisdictions as individuals. In other jurisdictions overseas police clearances may require in-person acquisition. Recognition of placement and induction conducted abroad also poses challenges, especially in relation to the fulfilment of Droichead induction requirements (The Teaching Council, 2017) for peripatetic teachers who teach small numbers of hours across multiple schools.

Non-EU Asian language teachers seeking to work in Ireland must also navigate the process of obtaining appropriate visas and work permits. This process is often complex and time-consuming. For teachers, this presents particular challenges due to the fluctuating demand for teaching hours and the competitive nature of securing full-time and long-term contracts to meet the salary requirements for work permits.

These multifaceted challenges significantly hinder the capacity of non-EU Asian language teachers to establish long-term teaching careers in Ireland. Candidates may legally stay and work in Ireland for varying durations, ranging from months on a working holiday to up to two years on a graduate visa obtained shortly after completing a postgraduate degree in Ireland (Department of Justice, 2024). Even with full awareness of the registration, visas, and work permit requirements, along with a supportive school willing to employ them with sufficient hours, completing all necessary processes and fulfilling requirements before commencing teaching can take several to many months, often extending beyond visa and resident permit expiration dates.

### **Access to teacher training programmes**

In Ireland, the pathway to becoming a qualified MFL teacher with a focus on Asian languages presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities for prospective educators. The existing MFL teacher training programmes are a testament to Ireland's commitment to linguistic diversity in education. However, these programmes often fall short of meeting the intricate needs associated with teaching Asian languages. At present, the availability of specialised training to qualify Asian languages teachers is limited. There is no ITE programme dedicated to Chinese, and only one Bachelor of Education programme in the country specifically includes Japanese. While a number of graduates have done the previous Higher Diploma in Education and the more recent Postgraduate Master's in Education with Japanese as one of

their subjects, the pedagogical input is very limited. This limitation signals a critical area for expansion, given the increasing interest in Asian cultures and languages among Irish students.

In the meantime, courses in Asian languages in Irish HEIs are still commonly available starting at the ab initio level, with few programmes dedicated to study Asian languages intensively and in the context of regional studies. The current approach, while providing foundational knowledge, highlights a notable absence of structured pathways for students to achieve higher levels of proficiency. To register as MFL teachers in Ireland, candidates are required to demonstrate language proficiency at a Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) level of B2.2 to ensure quality instruction (Council of Europe, 2020). Nonetheless, many candidates would find these criteria challenging to meet without additional language input.

This gap in language proficiency is particularly pronounced among candidates who have had interruptions in their language studies, either before or during their degree programmes. The design and emphasis of ITE programmes are geared towards equipping future teachers with a wide array of pedagogical skills rather than focusing on enhancing language proficiency. Consequently, the courses are not necessarily taught through the target language, leading to a potential decline in the linguistic capabilities of trainee teachers rather than the improvement in proficiency that they need. Conversely, heritage speakers and international students, who have already attained the requisite proficiency levels, embody significant potential within this framework. With the aforementioned limited pathways for native and heritage speakers of Asian languages to become teachers, as well as the awareness-raising and incentivisation around these pathways, their skills remain largely untapped.

## **Challenges in effective teaching and learning**

Language educators across all disciplines confront general challenges, notably the necessity of adapting pedagogical strategies post- COVID-19 pandemic (Heyworth et al., 2023), and that of staying abreast of advancements in Artificial Intelligence within the domain of language education (Huang et al., 2023). Specifically, in the context of Asian languages, effectively addressing these teaching and learning challenges demands a comprehensive understanding of the unique attributes of these languages, the dynamics of classroom interaction, and the specific curriculum requirements.

Among them, the most common challenge arises from the composition of the student cohort. As the specifications of Chinese and Japanese are both designed for foreign language studies and pitched at a beginner level, the classrooms can often include both heritage learners and ab initio learners. This diversity demands teaching strategies that can cater to a wide range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds as well as learning needs. There was a consistent need identified by the in-service teachers for implementing effective Universal Design for Learning strategies to help address this challenge, allowing for a more tailored approach that recognizes and supports the diversity in the classroom.

Another challenge is the incorporation of plurilingual and pluricultural awareness in the curriculum. Teachers trained in different educational systems may find it challenging to integrate these elements into their teaching due to differences in pedagogical approaches as well as their previous experiences of teaching and learning foreign languages. Strengthening teacher training to include a focus on developing such awareness can enhance teachers' ability to incorporate plurilingual and pluricultural dimensions into the curriculum, ensuring that this increasingly important aspect of learning is sufficiently addressed as intended in the curriculum.

Furthermore, the traditional focus on content delivery, often through textbook-based teaching, cannot fully align with the learning outcomes approach and the alignment with the CEFR as advocated in the new curriculum specifications. One of the primary issues is the unfamiliarity of teachers with the CEFR framework, especially those who were trained in non-European educational contexts. It can hinder their ability to effectively map language learning objectives, teaching activities, and assessments to the proficiency levels outlined in the curriculum specification. Transitioning towards a more learning outcomes-based teaching model requires a shift in teaching methodology, with an increased emphasis on interactive and communicative approaches that promote language use in context.

The alignment of Asian language specifications with the CEFR also introduces an additional layer to this challenge. While the CEFR provides a comprehensive guide for language proficiency, its capacity to incorporate the unique aspects of some Asian languages is a matter of concern. These languages, with their distinct scripts, tonal nuances, and cultural contexts, present challenges that the CEFR, originally developed with a stronger focus on European languages, may not fully accommodate (Guder, 2014; Zhang & Wang, 2018). Moreover, the CEFR's linear progression model may not fully capture the complexity of learning character-based languages like Chinese and Japanese. Teachers of Asian languages will need to navigate through the misalignments and make a good synergy of curriculum specifications, the CEFR and target language knowledge to design and deliver effective teaching and assessment.

Additionally, conducting formative assessments introduces specific challenges when teaching Asian languages in Ireland. Assessment within multilingual environments has been pinpointed as a crucial area requiring further research in the Irish context (Batardière, Berthaud, Čatibušić, & Flynn, 2023). Moreover, in many Asian educational systems, formative assessments are handled in a centralised manner, with less emphasis placed on the

individual teacher's role in this process (Chen & Li, 2021; Shimojima & Arimoto, 2017). This structural difference leads to a shortfall in training for internationally qualified teachers on how to effectively design and implement formative assessments in their classrooms. Lacking this essential competence, teachers might struggle to accurately monitor student progress and adapt their teaching strategies to fulfil varied learning needs, especially when executing classroom-based assessments in Junior Cycle.

### **Challenges in subject development**

The further development of Asian languages as school subjects faces several challenges identified by educators at all levels. To begin with, the diversification and capacity expansion of these languages are constrained by the scale and location of schools, predominantly centred in urban areas such as Dublin and Cork. In Ireland's post-primary education system, where the majority of established MFLs are European, the development of foreign language provision has sometimes been in the context of a demand from heritage language communities, leaning on inclusion strategies (Gasiorowska, 2020). These strategies are well-suited to heritage languages, benefiting from significant immigrant communities who speak these languages. However, Asian languages face distinct challenges due to the smaller size of their respective speaker communities.

For teachers, securing sufficient teaching hours in a single school can be challenging in the current school context in Ireland. It is more evident for newly qualified teachers, particularly for those who qualified outside of Ireland in only one school subject. This often results in a peripatetic teaching model, where teachers split their time between different schools. Such arrangements will impact teachers' ability to fully integrate into school communities, engage with colleagues, and raise awareness of Asian languages as valuable

subjects. It is important to address this reality in the early stages of subject implementation to help teachers establish more stable and integrated roles within schools.

Financial and logistical barriers to student and teacher mobility programmes for Asian languages further challenge the subject's development. Exchanges impact learners' motivation and opportunities to gain authentic linguistic and cultural experiences, which are crucial for deepening language learning and intercultural understanding. Unlike European languages, which have access to initiatives such as Erasmus+, Asian languages face a lack of equivalent opportunities. Due to the geographical distance, it is usually more costly to arrange similar programmes. Even with the assistance of technology, it is equally challenging to establish and manage a virtual exchange due to factors such as time differences and data security. These disparities affect both national and international support for mobility (e.g., that provided or assisted by Léargas, embassies and relevant cultural institutes for European languages) which needs to be available in order for Asian languages to flourish.

The advancement and long-term viability of Asian languages are influenced by dependence on external expertise. As reported by The Japan Foundation (2021), among the 48 identified Japanese teachers in all educational settings in Ireland, 31.3% of them are native speakers, which is evidently lower than the average of 70.6% in Western Europe. In the context of Chinese, initiatives like those of the Confucius Institutes have offered significant resources and opportunities for the teaching and learning of Chinese. Nonetheless, there are also instances where schools have been offering Chinese for more than ten years yet struggle to expand their offerings beyond Transition Year due to the lack of a suitably qualified subject teacher. As highlighted in a recent UK report (Natzler, 2022), the capabilities of such programmes ought to complement, rather than replace, the intrinsic educational infrastructure and capabilities.

## **Suggestions for sustainable teacher supply**

Exploring ways to ensure a steady supply of teachers proficient in the languages is crucial for the further development of Asian languages education in Ireland. The focus is on facilitating easier access to teaching roles, streamlining teacher education, and supporting teachers' continuing professional development.

### **Facilitating access to teaching positions**

A shortage of qualified teachers in Ireland is a more general issue beyond the teacher supply of Asian languages. It is imperative to foster collaboration across various sectors including education, enterprise, immigration, and diplomacy. Gaps in language skills on a national level should be clearly investigated and reported, to inform policymaking and to guide awareness-raising and curriculum design at all levels. In the context of securing necessary non-EU talent for the provision of Asian languages, the inclusion of non-EU language teachers within the framework of the Critical Skills Work Permit could markedly streamline their visa and work permit processes, facilitating easier entry into the Irish educational sector to address the needs.

In terms of providing access for the visiting tutors at cultural institutes, a comparative analysis of existing Foreign Language Assistant (FLA) schemes alongside programmes such as those offered by the Confucius Institute highlights opportunities for enhanced cultural agreements and collaborations. Based on the experiences of incorporating Japanese FLAs to facilitate the provision of the language, such initiatives could potentially integrate visiting tutors from China into the FLA scheme, thereby providing them with structured support and clear pathways to suitably qualified teacher training programmes in Ireland.

Raising awareness of the existing support mechanisms available such as the Migrant Teacher Project and PPLI is crucial. This includes encouraging and assisting qualified

teaching candidates, particularly those internationally qualified, to engage with the Teaching Council. Efforts should be directed towards refining the registration process for these educators, ensuring a more seamless integration into the Irish educational framework. Consideration should also be given to the evaluation of induction and adaptation periods conducted outside of Ireland, facilitated by the state-supported framework of ITE standards and induction to aid teachers qualified outside of Ireland in bridging any qualification gaps.

### **Establishing qualified teacher education programmes**

The establishment of dedicated ITE programmes for Chinese and Japanese language teachers is essential. These programmes should offer accessible pathways for high proficiency candidates, including heritage speakers and graduates from Irish and international language programmes, encouraging multidisciplinary collaboration between educational and language departments within and across institutions.

It is recommended that relevant third-level Asian language programmes align their outcomes with the enrolment criteria for ITE, ensuring these align with the Teaching Council's registration requirements, including the CEFR B2.2 proficiency level. It is also important to explore the development of bridging programmes and micro-credentials which could effectively address registration shortfalls. Initiating pilot programmes and raising awareness of these bridging opportunities would serve to close the gap between existing qualifications and the requisites for formal registration as required by promising candidates in Ireland.

Additionally, the provision of scholarships for students of ITE in Asian languages and funding for teaching staff and placement tutors in Asian languages at tertiary level would significantly bolster the teaching and learning capacity. Support offered by PPLI which

facilitates access to placement schools and which mentors teachers can be invaluable in this regard.

Enhancing the proficiency of language teachers through upskilling programmes is paramount. Short-term language enhancement initiatives could serve multiple objectives: qualifying candidates with minor shortfalls, upskilling current teachers, and fostering collaboration across educational levels. Working in partnership with embassies and cultural institutes to augment language upskilling and CPD programmes would further enrich the teaching pool. The establishment of a national language centre could coordinate and support language upskilling across all educational levels, facilitating access to resources and fostering collaboration, thereby catering to both individual and societal needs of language and work skills acquired through the learning of languages.

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