
ROYAL IRISH ACADEMY



LANGUAGE POLICY & LANGUAGE PLANNING IN IRELAND

A report from the Royal Irish Academy Committee for
Modern Language, Literary & Cultural Studies

Authors: Professor Pól Ó Dochartaigh and Ms Miriam Broderick
Programme Manager: Ms Vanessa Berman

ACADAMH RÍOGA NA HÉIREANN



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I. INTRODUCTION

On 2 February 2006 in Dublin Castle, the Royal Irish Academy Committee for Modern Language, Literary and Cultural Studies held a conference to discuss the need for and role of a language policy for Ireland. This is a summary of the proceedings of that conference and of the recommendations made by the Committee and conference delegates. The recommendations have been organised under six headings and are presented at the end of this report. It is intended that this report will encourage further debate and research, with a view to the eventual implementation of the conference recommendations.

Modern languages for modern Ireland

Ireland has changed dramatically since the beginning of the 1990s, and its population is linguistically and culturally more heterogeneous than at any previous stage in the country's history. Unless a clear awareness of the import of these changes develops, alongside a strategy for promoting multilingualism and multiculturalism, Ireland may repeat many of the mistakes made by other European countries whose populations changed significantly in the mid-20th century. Where linguistic and cultural changes have not been adequately addressed by governments and populations as a whole, alienation that has often led to violence has resulted, and skills that are present have been underused.

In addition to this, it is the case that clear economic benefits derive from the presence of a reservoir of linguistic skills in the country. Conversely, there is economic weakness in the absence of such skills. A languages policy will undoubtedly require some investment, but there can be no doubt that a

coherent policy would lead to efficiency gains in business, health, law and a range of other areas of Irish life. Ireland could and should aim to be a genuinely bilingual country, with a clear pool of language resources beyond the two native languages, because all of Irish society would benefit if the country were to achieve such a status.

Through the Lisbon strategy of economic, social and environmental renewal, the European Union is committed to developing a society based upon knowledge. This is a key element in moving towards the EU's objective of becoming the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world by the end of the decade.

The European Commission is also working to develop the entrepreneurial spirit and skills of EU citizens (for example through the European Charter for Small Enterprises as well as the Green Paper on Entrepreneurship). Learning other languages contributes to this goal by improving cognitive skills and strengthening learners' mother-tongue skills, including reading and writing. Such goals will be easier to achieve if language learning is effectively promoted in the European Union, thereby making sure that European citizens, and companies, have the intercultural and language skills necessary to be effective in the global market place.

Put simply, Ireland cannot afford, economically or culturally, to become a monoglot nation of English speakers, reliant primarily on the 'new Irish' to broaden our languages skills base. We welcome the government's decision to ask the Council of Europe to report on languages in Ireland, and we hope that a debate on the role of languages in modern Ireland will ensue. A language strategy is needed, and the first step in putting such a strategy in place is dialogue between language professionals, politicians and the various

stakeholders in our society. We call for a debate that will move us towards the establishment of a national agenda for language planning, with a view to establishing a language policy for Ireland. We call on interested national bodies, including the Department of Education and Science, the Higher Education Authority and the Irish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences, to facilitate the dialogue that will be necessary to move Ireland to such a position.

The Irish context

This changing cultural and linguistic environment in Ireland is happening against a backdrop of decreasing uptake in languages at third level, coupled with decreasing numbers choosing to study languages for Leaving Certificate. Between 2001 and 2005, a steady decline was evident in the number of people sitting Leaving Certificate examinations in foreign languages and Irish at Higher Level. Almost 2,500 fewer students studied the six most popular Higher Level languages in 2005 than in 2001.

less than five: from 375 to 379.4. This compares with an average jump of 27 points for medical courses (ranging from 570 in NUI Galway to 590 in Trinity College Dublin). At UCC, the average trend in points required for courses including a language shows an increase of ten, from 406 to 416, between 2001 and 2005. If entry points are a measure of demand for courses, these figures show that the demand for places on courses that include a foreign language has not kept up with the general trend. In addition, there has been an overall drop in the points requirements across a range of subjects in 2006, and early indications are that the trend in relation to languages is also downward.

It is crucial that the government shows some leadership in formulating a response to this trend. A fundamental first stage would be the formulation and implementation of a national language policy, and it is this project that was the subject for discussion at the conference held by the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin Castle on 2 February 2006.

Year	Irish	French	German	Italian	Spanish	Arabic	Total	Total (excl. Irish)
2005	14358	14611	4688	167	1135	126	35085	20727
2004	14876	15164	4983	115	1012	135	36285	21409
2003	15102	15054	5074	96	908	123	36357	21255
2002	14901	15212	5170	115	963	86	36447	21546
2001	15719	16054	5874	102	871	123	38743	23024

Over the same period, the average number of points required at CAO final-round offer stage for courses that include a foreign language (ranging from 260 for Languages & Business Administration in Athlone IT to 560 for Business and French in Trinity College Dublin, in 2005) increased by

II. THE CONFERENCE

Against a backdrop of a growing interest in plurilingualism and multiculturalism, the Royal Irish Academy Committee for Modern Language, Literary and Cultural Studies organised a conference entitled 'Language Policy and Language Planning in Ireland' on 2 February 2006, in Dublin Castle. The aim of the conference was to explore what are considered to be the key elements of a language policy. In attempting to take forward the deliberations of this conference, the ideas that came out of the event are presented in this report. These ideas look not just at modern foreign languages but also, to some extent, at the position of the Irish language. The recommendations are not restricted to the traditional educational sphere, but look beyond this to society as a whole, to the concept of lifelong learning and to the need for proficiency in languages not merely for economic, but also for social and cultural reasons in modern Ireland.

As part of the conference, a public lecture was given on 1 February by language expert Professor David Crystal, who highlighted the issues of 'Language death' and the need for an active, artistic approach to sustain dying cultures. This was followed the next day by a more policy-driven session, which was attended by key stakeholders in the educational system and opened by the Minister for Education and Science, Mary Hanafin.

The keynote lecture was delivered by policy expert Professor Bernard Spolsky of Bar-Ilan University, Israel. He outlined clearly the steps necessary to work towards a comprehensive language policy. The text of Professor Spolsky's lecture is available at www.ria.ie.

The opening session of the conference was followed by a series of workshops that addressed fundamental issues, including:

- From language policy to language planning
- The challenge for Europe
- Modern foreign languages and multiculturalism
- The case for modern languages in further and higher education in Ireland
- Strategies and curricula in the Irish context
- The role of the education system in the maintenance of Irish.

A plenary session closed the conference. A panel of experts discussed issues raised in the workshops and also responded to questions from the floor. The ten core issues raised at the plenary session and throughout the workshops are reported on the following pages.

1. A language policy for Ireland

Ireland needs to develop a national strategy for languages for very sound economic and cultural reasons. It is crucial that Ireland develop a national strategy which will address all aspects of language education and the development of skills in both native and foreign languages.

2. An advisory body

A 'National Advisory Body' should be established to liaise with language professionals, politicians and all stakeholders in society. This body would research the changing linguistic needs of society and propose a suitable strategy for meeting those needs. It would have a remit across all government departments and would have responsibility for:

- Planning and policy development
- Overseeing research
- Initiating relevant research to underpin long-term planning
- Monitoring broader language issues
- Representing Irish interests in international debate
- Fostering awareness of the economic benefits that multilingualism brings to society.

Many countries have developed comprehensive language policies, but few have well-integrated and balanced ones. Ireland has the opportunity to learn from developments elsewhere and to ensure that a well thought out and integrated policy is developed. A single, dedicated body could ensure that best practice is followed and that suitable short-, medium- and long-term policies are formulated and implemented.

3. Implementation of current policy

A number of government policies and initiatives have been agreed and are being tested. These must be implemented country-wide:

- The government has already signed up to the European policy of 'Mother Tongue + 2' and should now commit to its implementation in the secondary school curriculum. In this context, it is important that linguistic diversification be embraced: in the current European structure of 25 countries Ireland should not restrict access to language acquisition in our schools to a handful of dominant foreign languages.
- The development and roll-out of existing foreign-language pilot schemes across a wider range of schools throughout the State should take place. In combination with this, thought must be given to a strategy for continuation of language learning into secondary level, so that pupils are not faced with the prospect of beginning again from scratch a language in which they have already achieved significant learning outcomes.
- Increased levels of teaching through the foreign language should be encouraged, using native speakers where possible and perhaps drawing on the linguistic skills of the 'new Irish'.

4. Social change and new demand on teachers

Contemporary developments in Ireland in cultural, social and demographic areas need to be analysed, as a range of factors now influence the situation of languages and possible future initiatives. There are a number of deficiencies and needs that must be addressed urgently in a future language policy:

- A sense of respect for other cultures and societies, seen as an integral part of pupils' intellectual and cognitive development, must be fostered.
- The fast-growing field of ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) now requires defined standards and the development of a system of certification for Ireland. Work on ESOL needs to deal with the primary, post-primary, middle, higher and adult education sectors.
- A system of accreditation for interpreters is a crucial factor in Ireland's growing multilingualism. Interpreters working in sectors such as court and legal interpretation have no system of licensing or accreditation, and this presents an acute problem in the light of the delicate nature of their work. The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland must be encouraged to implement such a scheme.

5. Teacher proficiency

The apparent fall in levels of proficiency among teachers of Irish and some other languages is a matter for concern. Teachers have a central role in advancing plurilingualism and diversity, and it is crucial that a high level of competence among teachers be achieved and maintained. Embracing and promoting new and active methods of language teaching in schools is seen as problematic, unless the teachers' level of proficiency is high. This issue is of concern for the teaching of both Irish and foreign languages. Certain steps could be taken to ameliorate this situation:

- All students entering training college should be required to learn a foreign language during the course of their studies.
- A dedicated language-teaching degree should be instituted in the State, such that our secondary-level language teachers, by the time they are employed in schools, will have in-depth knowledge not just of 'teaching and languages', but of 'teaching languages'. Such a degree would have the effect of significantly reinforcing the acquisition of language skills in our schools.
- A 'languages in science' campaign, coupled with increased provision of *ab initio* courses at third level, should be encouraged. Such courses would offer a route to the acquisition of language skills to those who have chosen other career paths and could provide access to languages which may not have been available on school curricula; thus these courses could play an important part in broadening our language skills base.
- Increased investment in postgraduate work in languages would be welcomed. The recent announcement of the New Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation and also the investment that has been made in the

humanities in recent years by the Irish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences have been helpful, although we acknowledge that this funding is still far from adequate. A clear, strategic positioning of languages within the developing postgraduate research environment in Ireland is of key importance.

- The acquisition of at least one language in addition to English and Irish should be an essential part of training for all teachers in primary schools. Moreover, the acquisition of language skills should not be assumed to cease upon graduation. Having once acquired the language skills necessary to teach at this level, teachers should be able to avail of refresher programmes that reinforce those skills throughout their working lives.
- An improvement in the attainment of pupils in Irish at Leaving Certificate level would ensure that students entering training colleges or universities to study Irish would have stronger linguistic skills and better attainment in higher education.
- Trainee teachers of Irish should spend an extended period and also undertake some of their training in a Gaeltacht area, just as future teachers of foreign languages should be required to spend a year in the country of the target language.
- The amount and frequency of exposure to other languages is critical to linguistic diversity in other countries. Irish media networks or theatres do not regularly present original-language versions of films, television programmes, theatre productions and other events, which undoubtedly contribute to better success in language learning. A simple comparison with, for example, Scandinavian countries, where films are shown in the original languages with subtitles, should suffice to illustrate this point.

6. Methods and approaches to teaching

To increase exposure to foreign languages, various measures could be taken in schools:

- Recent research shows that bilingual and immersion approaches to the language curriculum are generally acceptable to parents. They are usually supportive of such methods, as long as the partial immersion or content-based language teaching (CLIL) does not exceed 20%–25% of the school curriculum. These approaches allow time to be gained for Irish, or other languages, without reducing the time allocation to other subjects. New approaches, such as CLIL, should not, however, be valued solely on the basis of gaining extra time for languages in a very full curriculum, but also for the motivation they foster and the meaningful content they bring to the language syllabus.
- The Council of Europe framework to facilitate common approaches to standards and benchmarking around Europe has been generally endorsed. The slow adoption of this framework and of the European Language Portfolio in Ireland are perhaps due to the lack of in-service training for teachers, which is a necessary prerequisite for effective work with the portfolio. The lack of in-service training also hinders the wider adoption of new methods of and innovative approaches to language teaching. Training for language teachers should be recurrent, and must be seen as part of a lifelong learning process. For young teachers in training, a full mentoring system should be developed.
- Innovative approaches are demanding and are only likely to succeed where there is parental interest and support, teacher confidence and a high level of language proficiency. Further, the assessment process should not be allowed to impede the introduction of new approaches.

- Information and Communication Technology has been successfully introduced in language teaching through various initiatives and its use could be extended to all schools as it improves motivation and attainment.

7. Research and development

Greater funding for research in the humanities and social sciences is now available in Ireland. This should be earmarked to fund:

- research to underpin policy development, especially for languages in education;
- co-operative and applied research.

The research findings of languages research should be disseminated by the new advisory body proposed above.

8. The challenge from Europe

The effects of the challenge from the European Commission to increase diversification in the languages taught at primary and secondary level and to strive for multilingualism should be examined. Pilot schemes and language initiatives have increased the number and range of languages taught, but this is considered to have happened in a non-integrated way. There is therefore a need for a well-worked out series of strategies to manage the diverse initiatives and analyse the benefits and challenges for primary, secondary and tertiary education.

Further EU measures have focused especially on the rights of minorities and their languages. An important development is the strong legal support now available in the EU under 'language rights', especially the right for minority groups to an education through their mother tongue. This and the concept of cultural rights have become central to the debate on language policy in Europe. These issues will require significant debate and consideration in the development of a language policy for Ireland.

The International Covenant on Social, Economic, Cultural and Linguistic Rights stipulates the right to participate in one's own culture. This could have implications for a range of issues, including the teaching and maintenance of community languages. It is therefore important to address the full complexity of issues around language planning.

Immigrant groups do not benefit from the new EU measures on plurilingualism and multilingualism. European governments take responsibility mainly for teaching the state languages to new minority groups. A small number of EU member states do provide some teaching of community languages in the school setting, though not always integrated into the curriculum. This issue needs to be addressed urgently, and the inclusion of a variety of immigrant languages, where the number of native speakers is significant, would be a useful and necessary addition to the curriculum and to society as a whole.

9. The language policy and business

The idea of clearly defined targets for a language policy is strongly supported by business needs. The statements and findings in the Forfás expert group report on future skills needs and in IBEC surveys over the years indicate a number of key issues:

- There is a clear need for languages in business, but the requirement may not always be for a very high level of proficiency.
- Learning goals for languages must be flexible, and cultural competence may be as important for those in business as linguistic skills.
- Different levels of competence may be required by different personnel. An LSP (language for special purposes) or vocationally-oriented approach may be appropriate.
- Increased numbers of high-quality language courses for adults should be made available.

10. Parents and politicians: the way forward

A range of important stakeholders should be consulted in the language policy debate, particularly parents and politicians.

- Parents play a vital role in supporting and influencing subject choices at all levels of schooling. They also experience first hand the linguistic skills of workers from the EU accession states and observe the role of motivation in language learning. They must be consulted on language education in Irish schools, especially on the introduction of new European Commission policies such as plurilingualism and what this might imply for language choices in schools.
- Politicians from all parties must be involved in the ongoing discussion. Varying attitudes towards a number of government and EU initiatives have been aired in both the Dáil and the press. A National Forum would give all interested parties the opportunity to debate the issues and air opinions.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. National strategy

a. Aims

- It is crucial that Ireland develop a national strategy for languages which will address all aspects of education and the development of language skills, both native and foreign, in Ireland.
- A National Advisory Body should be established to liaise with language professionals, politicians and all stakeholders in society. This body would research the changing linguistic needs of society, and propose a suitable language strategy.
- The Advisory Body should also foster awareness of the economic and cultural benefits of multilingualism in society, the transferable skills acquired in language learning and the benefits of multiculturalism and linguistic diversity in terms of tolerance and cultural richness.
- The Advisory Body could represent Ireland in international fora on language issues.

2. Languages at primary level

a. Teachers

- All primary school teachers must acquire another language in addition to English and Irish as an essential part of their training.
- Refresher programmes to reinforce language skills must be available throughout the working lives of teachers.

b. Teaching

- Existing pilot schemes for foreign language teaching must be developed and rolled out across a wider range of schools throughout the State.
- Students who have already learned the basics of a language should not have to start from scratch on entering secondary schools. A strategy to accommodate appropriate progression in language learning should be developed.
- Teaching through the foreign language is to be encouraged, using native speakers where possible.

3. Languages at secondary level

a. Teachers

- A lifelong learning approach to maintaining and developing the skills of language teachers must be fostered.

b. Teaching

- The European policy of 'Mother Tongue + 2' must be implemented.
- A broad spectrum of languages must be accessible on the school curriculum.

4. Languages at third level

a. Courses

- A dedicated language-teaching degree must be established.
- All students undertaking a degree in which a language is the major component should be required to spend a significant period abroad in order to acquire the linguistic skills that are essential if the language is to be used properly after graduation.
- A 'Languages in Science' campaign should be initiated.
- Increased funding for postgraduate work in languages is needed.

b. Investment

- Funding bands for language teaching must be commensurate with the need to teach intensively, in comparatively small groups, using technologies appropriate to modern language acquisition.

5. Fostering Irish

a. Strategies

- Teaching methodologies between Irish and modern foreign languages should be co-ordinated.
- Extended periods of residence in the Gaeltacht should be compulsory for those training to teach Irish.
- The introduction of some teaching of other subjects through the medium of Irish in non-Irish-medium schools should be encouraged.

b. Policy

- Study should be undertaken of the role and function of Irish in the implementation of a language policy, with comparison made to the experience of other countries and regions, such as Wales and Catalonia.

6. Beyond school and university

a. Policy

- It is essential that a strategy be developed to promote languages in the community, including language skills among the 'new Irish'.
- A programme for the standardisation of qualifications for interpreters for courts, hospitals, etc. must be established.
- Debate must be opened into the need for a bill of language rights, including the right to learn and use sign language.

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