



Submission on a Foreign Languages in Education Strategy for Ireland

November 2014

Ibec's main business sectors are:

Alcohol Beverage Federation of Ireland

Financial Services Ireland

Food and Drink Industry Ireland

ICT Ireland

Telecommunications and Internet Federation

Irish Medical Devices Association

PharmaChemical Ireland

Retail Ireland

Small Firms Association

Industrial Products.

Introduction

Ibec welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the framework consultation on a 'Foreign Languages in Education Strategy for Ireland'. While it is understandable that recent economic crisis created other priorities, this consultation is long overdue. It is over six years since the Council of Europe declared:

*'the main challenge, in terms of vision for the future, is perhaps to shift progressively from an official but lame bilingualism (English/Irish) to the full recognition of differentiated plurilingual profiles (with varying languages and types of competences at different levels) ...'*¹

The key phrase here is a 'vision for the future'.

Ibec is fully aware that language teaching and learning require significant time and resources. The benefits to the individual, the economy and society may not become apparent for many years. An over-crowded school curriculum and competing demands for finite resources also militate against the education system taking this issue seriously.

The widespread use of English across the globe means that this is not a political priority (despite much rhetoric about linguistic diversity being a core value of the European Union), or indeed one that receives sufficient attention in the business community itself (beyond the growing number of, mainly multinational, companies with specific language requirements).

This prevailing attitude will have grave economic, social and cultural consequences. Ireland needs more of its people to speak foreign languages – for employability, for trade and the economy and for our cultural life.

We need to be honest about the scale of the challenge and the number of barriers. Over the years, there has been a plethora of national and European reports on this subject. There are, and have been, a myriad of worthwhile modern language projects, campaigns, programmes and initiatives. Yet, Irish citizens lag behind most of their European counterparts in foreign languages.

The thrust of this submission is that we need a 'vision for the future' that is shared across the system if we are to seriously address the challenge. For this reason, it does not seek to explicitly respond to each of the questions in the Consultation Framework – many of which are more properly the preserve of the educationalists.

The submission also has a functional and instrumental focus on language acquisition. This should not be interpreted as undervaluing the academic or cultural value of language study. As Ireland's business organisation, Ibec views language competence as a competitiveness issue and this is the framework through which we are considering for the purposes of this submission.

¹ Council of Europe, Language Policy Division and Department of Education and Science, *Language Education Policy Profile*, Ireland (Strasbourg: Council of Europe; Dublin: Department of Education and Science, 2008. www.coe.int), p. 34.

1. A national modern languages policy

The starting point for any consideration of a foreign languages in education strategy should be the *Language Education Policy Profile: Ireland* (see above), published jointly by the European Council and the Department of Education and Skills in 2008. It is puzzling, therefore, why the current consultation has chosen to ignore the fundamental recommendation in this report:

'If the key advice to the national authorities could be summed up in one recommendation, it would be to examine the feasibility of an integrated, coherent, language in education policy.'

The current Consultation Framework document limits the scope of the strategy to post-primary and higher education, and excludes the role of Irish and English. These limitations contradict the Department's own policy and severely limit the value of the process. The strategy also focuses on 'main current concerns' rather than highlighting the need for an all-encompassing 'vision for the future' for modern languages, as previously recommended by the DES and the European Council.

It is worthwhile considering key observations of the *Language Education Policy Profile* report::

- A national language education policy is not just a matter for the education system. It depends largely on the societal context in which it is located, its past, its values, its forms of cohesion and its modes of organisation.
- If a national languages strategy were restricted mainly to the educational sector, its chances of achieving real success would be limited, because many of the key issues/challenges which need to be addressed in respect of both Irish and modern foreign languages, are societal as well as educational in nature.
- Languages in Ireland are currently considered and treated separately. Compulsory Irish is in the forefront and elicits considerable attention and concern. Modern foreign languages try to attract attention on their behalf but suffer from a limitation of space in the "crowded" curriculum, as well as from a certain lack of recognition and diversification.
- Given this situation, a first important step would be to 'decompartmentalise' the reflection on languages; that is to consider the language scene as a whole, where there is, to a degree, a relation of interdependence among the diverse components. This means bringing all languages into the one sphere of policy planning,

In short, Ireland needs an all-encompassing 'vision for the future' for modern languages. This requires a clear policy position on the place and role of languages in Irish society which is linked to national aspirations for international engagement in business, education and culture.

Recommendations

1. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) should define a clear policy position, in consultation with other government departments and stakeholders (including business) as appropriate, regarding the place and role of languages in Irish society and in the education system.
2. The DES could set up a Languages Advisory Board (LAB), charged with the task of drafting and proposing a range of options for political decision. Board membership should include representatives from relevant government departments, business, IDA, Enterprise Ireland, language specialists at all levels of the Irish education system (nominated by National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, SOLAS and the Higher Education Authority) and the Immigrant Council of Ireland.
3. The mandate of the LAB, or the Working Group recommended by the *Language Education Policy Profile*, should be to:
 - a. To formulate a proposal for Government on the place and role of languages in society and education over the next 20 years.
 - b. To elaborate one or more broad but realistic scenarios for the integration of languages in the education system—at primary, post-primary, further and higher education levels—including English, Irish, foreign languages, Classical languages, and also the languages of immigrants and sign language.
 - c. To assess, for each of these scenarios, the principal implications in terms of resources, curriculum development, teacher education, assessment and certification, and also to determine what actions would be necessary on the part of the various bodies concerned;
 - d. To consider what structures or measures might be necessary to provide ongoing advice on language policy in the light of changing circumstances.

2. Building a demand for modern languages

The Consultation Document suggests that it can be difficult to establish the precise expectations and view of employers in respect of the foreign language competence of Irish graduates. We would agree.

However, we would also argue that basing a modern languages strategy within the limitations of the current business needs is short-sighted and unlikely to lead to the creation of a modern education infrastructure that will be critical for Ireland's future prosperity.

Business operates in a connected, technology-driven, inter-dependent, fast-changing and extremely complex international environment. This has largely been shaped by globalisation which has had a number of far-reaching consequences. In this highly dynamic environment, it is impossible to be too precise about where the employment opportunities will exist in the medium to long term, but there are some trends which we can predict with a degree of confidence:

- The end of US global economic dominance - the belief that English alone is enough to function successfully in both employment and life remains a widely held belief in countries where English is the mother tongue. However it should be remembered that 75% of the world's population do not speak any English and 94% do not speak it as their mother tongue. Foreign language skills, and a deep understanding of world cultures, are critical for exporting indigenous firms and foreign-owned firms engaged in international service activities.
- Growth of services – in Ireland, some 70% of employment and 40% of exports are in the services sectors. Service transactions generally involve a high level of human interaction and therefore require sophisticated communication skills including language proficiency..

Ireland is a small open economy which exports most of what it produces. In fact we are one of the most globalised economies in the developed world. Therefore the competitiveness of our companies in the global marketplace of the future is key. And being proficient in the language of their customer will be an increasingly critical component. This requirement for a competitive edge operates at two levels.

Multinational sector

Firstly, and this is the area which probably gets the most attention, it affects our ability to attract foreign direct investment. We constantly hear about the challenges facing high-profile multinationals who have set up operations here and who are recruiting outside Ireland to fill their language needs. These are heavily concentrated in contact centres, services centres and customer Service/Technical Support functions within the ICT sector.

Indigenous exporters – the unquantifiable missed opportunities

There is also a much deeper issue. Some 85% of the value of Irish exports comes from foreign-owned companies. In the longer term, this is probably not sustainable. Therefore our greatest business challenge is the development of indigenous exporting companies. And it is a challenge that we have failed to meet over decades of industrial policy development.

Irish companies will only gain a competitive edge and successfully enter new markets with the help of other languages. Better languages skills are needed wherever companies interact with service providers and suppliers, as well as in sales and marketing. Unfortunately for many SMEs in particular, it is a question of 'not knowing what they don't

know'. They tend to not even consider markets where they perceive language and cultural differences are an entry barrier. Exporting to the UK represents the height of their ambitions.. Therefore, there are unquantifiable and missed opportunities.

In a recent EU Eurobarometer Report², which surveyed companies across 27 EU countries employing more than 50 employees, only 9% of Irish companies surveyed considered that foreign language skills would be essential for future graduates over the next 5-10 years – compared to a 31% EU average. This was second lowest out of 27 EU member states (only the UK was lower).

Former UK treasury economic adviser, James Foreman- Peck, has calculated the effects of what he calls the 'tax on trade' represented by British relative underinvestment in languages. In an updated estimate for this report³, Prof. Foreman-Peck suggests that this currently equates to at least £7.3 billion, or 0.5% GDP.

A study of 400 exporters cited in the same report found that export managers who are linguists are more likely to be discriminating about the intelligence collected, and more innovative in their decision-making

Given that Ireland is a much more globalised economy, the 'tax on trade' could be much higher.

Young people and their families

This section has focused on building a demand for languages amongst business and employers. However, young people should also be given opportunities to sample a range of languages and cultures during their school career. They and their parents should also seek out more opportunities for language learning outside school, and all students should receive appropriate advice about the benefits of competence in another language for work and adult life. There is strong evidence that young people respond positively to the involvement of employers in their learning. One particularly important area is careers information, advice and guidance, where there is evidence of a strong correlation between confidence in careers choices and the number of times that a learner has interacted with employers (such as via work experience, careers talks, enterprise competitions or workplace visits).

As the European Council as argued, we need to develop in society at large the conviction that "English is not enough". That is to say, to convey the message that the economic, cultural and European future of Ireland depends on the valorisation of plurilingualism.

² http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_304_en.pdf

³ <http://www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/publications/languages-future>

Recommendations

4. The Languages Advisory Board should coordinate a broad mobilisation/awareness campaign in support of a national commitment to modern languages
5. The Languages Advisory Board should commission high-quality research on current and future missed business opportunities as a result of under-investment and incoherence in modern languages policy
6. Based on this research, the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, and its relevant agencies, should organise an information/awareness campaign to highlight the business opportunities that can be created through language acquisition, particularly for exporting SMEs.
7. Businesses should be encouraged and supported to invest in the development of the linguistic skills in their own organisations from which they will benefit directly.
8. The Languages Advisory Board should establish awards for companies to recognise outstanding multilingual performance
9. Initiatives such as the annual 'Language Fair' by gradireland during which various companies offer vacancies to language graduates should be supported by careers services and employers.
10. The Institute of Guidance Counsellors should review the advice that its members are providing to pupils about the benefits of competence in another language

3. Identifying the languages and level of competence that Ireland needs

Which languages?

Successive surveys by Ibec and ICT Ireland have highlighted the growing demand for a broader range of languages from business. Two years ago, the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) published a study, *Key Skills for Enterprise to Trade Internationally*⁴, which sets out the skills and talent needed to drive Ireland's trade and export performance in both existing and emerging overseas markets

The report made a range of specific recommendations to ensure that our education, training and professional development meets the needs of our exporting companies. It recommends boosting the supply of foreign language skills (both numbers and proficiency) at third level including German, French, Spanish and Italian as well as Mandarin Chinese, Russian and Arabic. It also highlights the need to increase formal international sales training at third level, including compulsory modules on international sales in business courses and the introduction of a degree and post-graduate diploma in international sales with foreign languages.

For the growing export markets in China, Asia, Russia, South America and the Middle East, foreign language capability can be addressed in the short term in different ways including recruitment, upskilling employees, use of professional translation and interpreter services, and the hiring of native speaking agents in the target market. However some of these strategies, particularly the use of third party agents, are not optimal.

However, it can be difficult for the education system 'second guess' the languages that will be most closely aligned with our medium term economic requirements. We can say with some certainty that Mandarin Chinese (given that China will replace the US as the largest economy in the world within the next decade) and Spanish (as the second most widely spoken language in the world) will be in demand in the future. But other languages are more difficult to predict.

The British Council has introduced an interesting approach⁵ in which it tries to assess the UK's long-term strategic needs for languages and asks which of them are most likely to meet the UK's needs and aspirations over the next 20 or so years. It uses a number of criteria, based on both economic and non-economic factors, to help identify language requirements for global engagement, using evidence from a range of sources. These include:

- Current UK export trade
- The language needs of UK business
- Government's future trade priorities
- Emerging high growth markets
- Diplomatic and security priorities
- The public's language interests
- Outward and inward tourism
- Government's international education strategy priorities
- Levels of English proficiency in other countries
- The prevalence of different languages on the internet

⁴ http://www.skillsireland.ie/media/EGFSB22062012-Key_Skills_for_Enterprise_to_Trade_Internationally.pdf

⁵ <http://www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/publications/languages-future>

The report does not seek to provide the definitive answer – recognising that politics and priorities are very likely to change over time – but rather to provide material for an informed discussion of the issues. It also stresses all languages are valuable.

To what level?

There is a view, repeated in the current Consultation Document, that most companies, particularly in the multinational sector are seeking people with language skills are looking for native speakers or equivalent. The corollary, stated in the document, is that *'education can only go so far in meeting the need for functional mastery of a language, a level of proficiency which requires significant immersion and experience far beyond what could be provided in an education setting, even with study abroad elements.'* We would disagree.

The education system cannot abdicate responsibility for formation of language skills from an early age, opening young peoples' minds to multilingualism and different cultures and providing opportunities for significant immersion through studying abroad.

We agree with the document's suggestion that *'employers should look at their own graduate recruitment and up-skilling policies to give opportunities for graduates with strong language skills the opportunity for graduates to further develop them to a higher standard'*. However there is an assumption that the graduates have *'strong language skills'*. These should be developed within the education system.

It is not just fluency that is in demand; many employers say that they are interested in basic 'conversational ability'. This suggests that the level of competence which can be gained in learning a language whilst at school can be a major advantage in the labour market.

Research by Ibec and the EGFSN suggests:

- 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.

As the Confederation of British Industry has stated⁶,

"Language skills are increasingly important in a globalised economy. Staff who can communicate at least conversationally in another language – particularly where this is coupled with an understanding of overseas business culture – can be a great asset. Linguistic proficiency helps firms to consolidate their relationships with existing overseas trading partners and develop contacts in new markets."

The British Council puts this succinctly:

'Fluent' is an inhibitor, 'functional' is a liberator. It begins with a few words and phrases – and that small investment can grow into a lifetime of interest, employment and opportunity.

⁶ The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) 2010 Ready to grow: Education and skills survey 2010

Recommendations

11. The Languages Advisory Board should assess Ireland's long-term strategic needs for languages, using a number of criteria, based on both economic and non-economic factors, to help identify requirements for global engagement.
12. The national language policy should acknowledge that learning goals for languages must be flexible, and cultural competence may be as important for those in business as linguistic skills

4. An integrated approach

The Language Education Policy Profile report describes how the different levels or dimensions to an integrated language in education policy might be identified as:

- integrated education integrated with social action
- integrated between and across languages
- integrated with CLIL.(Content and Language Integrated Learning)

We would add an extra dimension:

- integrated with business and employment opportunities

The Language Education Profile document suggests that the primary level should be the keystone of language learning in the education system. Its omission from the current consultation is puzzling. A detailed planning exercise should be undertaken for language education in the primary school. Previous research by the NCCA and others are all contributions which could be useful in establishing an integrated approach, in drawing up a detailed curricular framework and action plan.

Language teaching and learning can suffer from compartmentalisation and fragmentation generally found in the curriculum and in the training of the language specialist teacher. The European Council has suggested that rather than emphasising individual subjects with parallel syllabuses, there might be a notion of a global language education policy and practice based on a vision of education for plurilingualism. This might involve a total of hours allocated to all language learning within which pupils would develop their plurilingualism from primary level and into second level. The proposed junior cycle reforms and the inclusion of Mandarin Chinese as a short course are a welcome initial step.

There is a growing dissatisfaction with the low cost-effectiveness of the teaching of Irish in the English medium schools. Results are deemed to be insufficient in spite of the 1500 class hours that a pupil spends being taught Irish. The strategy consultation seeks to exclude discussion of Irish on the basis that ‘significant work is currently being undertaken separately’.

It is impossible to develop a credible modern languages strategy without considering the position of Irish on the primary and secondary curriculum. The Language Education Policy Profile report included a comment that language planning in Ireland is still largely about the protection and regeneration of Irish, rather than about the implementation of a given articulated and well-labelled language policy that incorporates English, Irish and the other languages of Ireland. Language policy tends therefore to be ad-hoc and haphazard.

Discussion of the Irish language tends to be highly divisive. This need not be case. The One Voice for Languages Group, which aims to be a unified voice for various language networks and associations in Ireland, also includes Irish language teachers and academics.

Languages and the labour market

The European Commission's *Languages for Jobs* report⁷ sets out a number of recommendations to re-orient language teaching to develop targeted options and put language skills in context. These are given below.

⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/languages/policy/strategic-framework/documents/languages-for-jobs-report_en.pdf

Migrants and the Irish diaspora

Education and Training Boards Ireland has argued that migrants coming from non-English speaking homes can become one of our greatest assets⁸. If we assist them to acquire competence in their heritage languages, we will be going a significant way to meeting our need for workers fluent in both English and a foreign language.

Some national groups, such as the Polish, make a very big effort to ensure that their young develop proficiency in their heritage language, but the Polish and other national groups need assistance if they are to ensure that their offspring develop proficiency, to their benefit and to Ireland's. ETBI argues that the support that these national groups require has a number of dimensions. In the first instance, they need access to suitable buildings, free of charge, to accommodate their language classes. It also argues that we need to look at ways in which the teaching of heritage languages can be integrated into the school curriculum from Infants through to Leaving Certificate.

Recommendations

Primary level

14. The DES should undertake a detailed planning exercise for language education in the primary school.

Secondary level

15. DES and the NCCA should ensure that a global language education policy and practice based on a vision of education for plurilingualism is built into the junior cycle reforms
16. The possibilities offered by new technologies (e-learning, videoconferencing and virtual exchanges) should be fully explored by all interested parties at all levels (including lecturers, teachers, policy makers, education managers, government departments), with a view to diversifying and enhancing language education.

Irish as a modern language

17. DES should ensure teaching methodologies between Irish and modern foreign languages are co-ordinated.
18. DES should commission a study on 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.

Third level

19. Third-level institutions should be encouraged to equip all of their students with strong language skills and intercultural knowledge. While institutions may wish to protect the status of languages and literature as academic disciplines in their own right, they should also be persuaded to exploit the build capacity programmes for students to pursue language subjects which, while possibly outside their specialist fields, may well be of interest.

⁸ <http://www.etbi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Rethinking-Foreign-Language-Proficiency.pdf>

20. The ERASMUS programme should be more focused on placements in non-English speaking countries, including Germany, France, Italy and Spain -
21. The contextualisation of language teaching at third level in terms of its value to students in business and science departments should be encouraged – especially for managers, engineers and sales/marketing personnel.
22. Higher education institutions should introduce International Sales Degree programme with foreign languages with the active and support of business.

Languages and the labour market

23. The Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation and its agencies should expand the number of student internships combining language with marketing/sales opportunities in exporting companies. Ibec's Export Orientation Programme, which has been running since 1983, provides a good model which could be scaled up.
24. The education system should reorient language teaching to put language skills into context and develop dedicated language options in both initial vocational training and tertiary education to direct language learning towards a particular occupation.
25. SOLAS should encourage the development of specialised language training modules and methodology for teachers and trainers in FET. Collaboration involving language teachers and teachers of other subjects should be encouraged with a view to stimulating in-service teacher training.
26. Education and Training Boards should offer vocationally oriented language training to adult learners
27. Enterprise development agencies should improve employer capacity to manage and exploit language skills

Migrants and the Irish diaspora

28. Policy makers should find effective ways of utilising the vital language and cultural skills of Ireland's diaspora and minority communities. This talent should be used to enable education systems to increase opportunities to learn a broader range of languages

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