Language learning in Ireland at third level: requirements in a global world

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National Employer Survey –

• Employers’ Views on Irish Further and Higher Education Outcomes – May 2015

• Employer’s views on language skills required:
  – “Specific languages with a high level of proficiency in sufficient quantities”
Lack of language skills

- Employers were dissatisfied with both the number of languages and the level of proficiency held by graduates they employ.
- This is most true in relation to large organisations and foreign organisations.
- They require a higher level of proficiency for specific European languages.
Which languages?

- The core European languages of French and German were the most popular languages selected.
What level of proficiency?

• a higher level of language proficiency is required by foreign employer organizations

• 60% of all employer organisations require at least full professional proficiency in their graduate recruits.

• for indigenous employer organisations, Chinese language skills were required but a high degree of proficiency was not necessarily required
Multilingualism as economic opportunity

• Accepted that multilingualism would have economic benefits for Ireland:
  – Multilinguals who live and work in Ireland
  – Multilinguals who travel outside Ireland to conduct international business

• Why bother – English is widely spoken?
  – Why do people travel to conduct business?
Benefits of multilingualism:

• Communication
• Culture
• Cognition
• Curriculum
• Cash
• Career

(Baker 2002)
Ireland becoming multilingual:

- more than one in 10 people in Ireland speak a language other than Irish or English at home
  - 119,526 people speak Polish as their first language and of these 10,573 were born in Ireland.
  - Next: French, Lithuanian, German, Russian, Spanish, Romanian, Chinese, Latvian, Portuguese and Arabic.

(Irish Times web site, 12 June)
The multilingual classroom

- See the students’ home language(s) as a resource not a problem
- Students use their repertoire of languages for different purposes
Future of languages in Ireland

• Existing language speakers are a resource, but what of the future?
• Many will encourage their children to maintain their home or ‘heritage’ languages,
• In addition, L1 Irish English speakers need to learn more languages and better to achieve benefits for the economy. How to achieve this?
What does it mean to acquire another language?

• Usually thought of in terms of vocabulary and grammar

• But also:
  – sociolinguistic competence
  – what you say but also how you say it
Bachman’s model of communicative language ability

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<th>Organizational competence</th>
<th>Pragmatic competence</th>
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<td>Grammatical competence</td>
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<td>Illocutionary competence</td>
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<td>Sociolinguistic competence</td>
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(adapted from Adamson 2009)
Recent research on interactional competence

- Adds to sociolinguistic competence.
- Broader framework: dynamic and dialogic aspects of communication
- Face to face interaction, shared between speakers in interaction
Interactional knowledge:

- Locally situated
- Jointly constructed in discourse by the speakers
- Participants' resources not set in advance but dependent on the dynamic social context: Here's the place for Year Abroad/Erasmus
Year Abroad

• We learn by participating in context specific discourse practices

• Learning as participation:
• Erasmus provides multiple contexts for acquisition of fine grained language knowledge
Trust and community

- Minimal language competence to achieve a task
  - “when bus arrive?”

- Additional competence to stop language being a barrier
  - “when do you think the bus will arrive?”

- Sufficient sophistication to build trust and common experience
  - “isn’t it a shame that Dublin Bus is axing this bus route?”
In the education system, where do we learn languages?

- In the classroom
- Immersion education: Canadian immersion/Irish Gaelscoileanna
- Study Abroad

How do we determine the effectiveness of learning in these different settings?
Variationist research:

1. variation exists in language ("two ways of saying the same thing")
2. this variation is not random but highly systematic
3. measure variation as a way of comparing speakers in a quantitative rather than impressionistic manner
4. This is done by looking at specific sounds or words, controlling for other factors.
Variables

- Ne deletion
- On/nous alternation
- /l/ deletion in personal pronouns
Year Abroad: rates of Ne deletion

Varbrul probability figures for deletion rates for the three years:

Year 1  .36
Year 2  .59
Year 3  .54

speakers improved when they spent a year abroad, and they retained that pattern a year after returning.
Study Abroad: Rates of ne deletion individual speakers

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<td>Miles</td>
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/l/ deletion in two contexts

Classroom and Year Abroad

Howard, Lemée and Regan (2004)

Irish learners before year abroad:
4% deletion

after year abroad:
33% deletion
On/nous alternation

Irish Year Abroad

the longer the stay abroad, the greater the rates of ON usage
The effect of a year abroad on % of colloquial lexemes

Dewaele and Regan 2001
Linguistic outcomes of Year Abroad

• context plays an important role in the acquisition of fine-grained, subtle variation patterns

• the more contact with native speakers, the greater the linguistic gains in sociolinguistic competence

• effects are long term
The Quantitative triangulated with the Qualitative:

- Shows that successful outcomes don’t just depend on ‘being abroad’
- It depends also on:
- Affordances, investment, agency, motivation and attitude
Can the classroom achieve sociolinguistic competence?

- Yes. Lyster, 2004, shows that instruction is indeed beneficial but it must be over some time-not just a once-off lesson.

- E.g. that integrating instruction on the pronouns *tu* and *vous* throughout an academic term helped learners develop a better understanding of these pronouns.
Conclusions

• sociolinguistic competence is most effectively acquired in the native speech community

• The more attuned the classroom is to the naturalistic context the greater the gains in sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence

• This is part of the multilingualism so important for individuals and society
Conclusion

- Multilingualism has benefits for Irish citizens, for society and for the economy.
- These benefits are worth the effort of acquiring and using multiple languages, and not confining ourselves to English.
- Fosters links between individuals, countries and cultures, changes perspectives on diversity, enables individuals to operate in different cultural and economic climates.