



## **Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) Response to a call for submissions on foreign languages in education strategy (September 2014)**

TUI represents teachers (10,000+) employed by Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and in Community and Comprehensive (C&C) Schools. TUI believes that proficiency in foreign languages is very important for students, particularly given Ireland's status as a small open economy (SOE), and as a country with a history of migration. Furthermore, Ireland is behind its European partners in terms of experience of foreign languages. In 2006, at ISCED Level 2, Irish students studied an average of 1.0 foreign languages. The EU 27 average was 1.4. Every country in the EU27 bar Ireland, Hungary and the UK did more than 1.0 foreign languages (source: Eurostat).

This submission is made without prejudice to the TUI position on current Junior Cycle Framework proposals or any future changes to Leaving Certificate language subjects. This submission is not being made in the form of the template provided for in the call for submissions as the template does not best suit the issues we intend to raise.

### **Importance of foreign languages**

*"Although Ireland was not a mono-ethnic nation prior to the Celtic Tiger era, the diversity of the population has increased substantially in recent years, with immigrants coming from a range of national, social, cultural, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds."* Darmody *et al.* (2011: xii)

MacEinri and White (2008: 153) have described recent Irish experience as "unique, at least in European terms". Immigrant inflow between 1998 and 2003 increased Irish Gross Domestic Product

(GDP) by 2.6% (Smyth *et al.*, 2009). Eight countries had 10,000 or more of their citizens living in Ireland. Only two of those countries, the United States of America and the United Kingdom, are English speaking. Hence, there is a substantial opportunity for students in Irish schools to experience living languages through their teachers and fellow students.

As well as the opportunities provided by students migrating into Ireland, Ireland also has a tradition of emigration in pursuit of economic opportunities. An Irish Times report of April 2014 cites figures of 40,700 for net migration in the twelve months to April 2014 compared to 50,900 in the 2012-2013 period. The most popular destinations in descending order were the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada. It is not possible to determine why those three countries in particular should be the most popular, particularly given the distance to Australia and Canada but it may be the case that Irish emigrants gravitate towards countries where English is the first language and hence may be less confident about pursuing opportunities in countries which don't routinely speak English.

The Valeur report (McPake & Tinsley, 2007) identified 158 languages being spoken in Ireland. La Morgia (2011:11) points out that "there are no policies that concern the maintenance of minority languages within the school context" in Ireland. It should be noted that "Ireland's experience differs from that of traditional immigration-receiving countries in Europe" (Darmody *et al.*, 2011: xi) in that performance gaps between Irish and non-Irish students tend to be in favour of the non-Irish students. The population of Ireland is 11% foreign-born (CSO, 2007).

In addition to the above, Ireland is also a SOE which relies on trade for a significant proportion of its GDP. For example, exports in the six months to the end of July 2014 amounted to c.€43bn, whilst imports in the same period amounted to c.€27bn (source: [www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/gei/goodsexportsandimportsJuly2014](http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/gei/goodsexportsandimportsJuly2014)). Our biggest trading partners were the United States and the United Kingdom, but non-English speaking countries such as Belgium, Switzerland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, China and Japan also featured prominently. Hence, languages are important to future prosperity of our country.

## **Resourcing**

It is critically important that any provision of language education be adequately resourced both in staffing and with funding. The ability of teachers to maximise practice in oral proficiency requires a small class size so that the teacher can engage with each individual student and student group. Language exchanges provide valuable opportunities for students to practise their chosen language, but often such exchanges are only available to students whose parents have access to significant disposable income. Access to language shouldn't be determined by family income.

### **Additional training**

It is possible that new approaches to teaching languages may be now known which weren't known a short time ago. More support for teachers may be required from PDST in order to enable teacher explore new methods of pedagogy. Such training must be provided at zero cost to teachers and at times and venues which are convenient. It is not appropriate for such training to be provided in evenings or at weekends. Full substitute cover must be provided to schools so as to encourage schools and teachers to participate in additional training. It is possible that existing language teachers will be interested in learning new languages that they could then teach in due course. For example, a teacher currently teaching French may be interested in taking a course in Chinese and then after finishing the course would be able to teach it in their school. The Department of Education and Skills should give priority to supporting teachers to undertake such additional training, rather than using people who can speak a language but have no teaching qualification. Using such unqualified people instead of recognised teachers would lead to concerns about quality provision but also about child protection.

### **Languages to be compulsory?**

TUI does not accept that languages should be compulsory. Whilst TUI strongly considers languages to be very important, it is difficult to judge the relative importance of subjects which currently all share the status of being 'option' subjects. Furthermore, languages present particular difficulties for some students so it is not appropriate to force all subjects to undertake them. The study of languages should be encouraged but not forced.

### **Ability to undertake State examinations in languages other than English**

At present, students from some countries are able to answer State examination papers in their home languages. TUI understands that this may be available only to students whose first language is from Europe. The current discussion on foreign languages in Irish education may be a good opportunity to explore whether the opportunity to take State examinations in the home language should be available to students from a broader range of countries. This may have resourcing implications, but there is an equity argument to be considered, as well as considerations of how Ireland perceives students from non-European countries.

#### Availability of teachers

It is important to note that provision of foreign languages in Irish education depends on the availability of sufficient numbers of qualified teachers without prejudicing the positions of existing staff and without creating a series of jobs with very small hours each. The Government has made significant progress in recognising the problem of casualisation in teaching, and in reducing the problem, by accepting the recommendations of the Ward report in September 2014. It would not be satisfactory for a large number of language teaching posts to be the subject of very small numbers of teaching hours because a school was trying to provide too many different languages. As outlined above in the paragraph “additional training”, it would be preferable for existing language teachers to be offered the opportunity to undertake study in new languages at zero cost to themselves. There must be no compulsion in this as it would be likely to backfire as a result. These teachers are already embedded in the lives of their schools and students and have recognised training in pedagogy, as well as being recognised by the Teaching Council. Any additional staff who can be recruited above and beyond current staff numbers would be most welcome but those new jobs must be ‘substantial’ jobs with all of the rights of existing teachers.

#### Involvement of outside agencies

Support for the provision of foreign languages in Irish education from agencies outside of education (e.g. foreign governments through their agencies or embassies) has the potential to provide worthwhile support but programmes should not be dependent on such support for their ethos or provision. There has been some anecdotal evidence of outside agencies providing language education in Europe but demanding that particular people teach the programme and also putting in place demands that certain topics (such as human rights or certain religions) must not be discussed in the classroom. This is an unacceptable infringement on the proper recruitment of teachers by the

employer in Irish education, and an unjustifiable attack on the professional judgement of the classroom teacher. It is also important that the valuable support of the outside agency in providing for example additional expertise or access to study visits etc., must not degenerate into the 'privatisation' of a public good.

### **Advice in choosing languages or other subject options**

Recent research by TUI shows that cuts in guidance provision have resulted in 91% of guidance counsellors spending less time than previously talking to stakeholders about subject choice. Guidance counsellors have traditionally played a key role in advising students which subjects would best suit their individual talents, as well as informing students about which subjects are required for college entry. The recent cuts to guidance provision must be reversed if students are to be able to access much needed advice from a qualified guidance counsellor.

### **Role of SOLAS**

It is likely that a Department of Education and Skills policy on foreign languages in education will have an impact in the area of further and vocational education, especially in the context of reports from the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs and the Government five year strategy for Further Education and Training. It is not possible for TUI to draw firm conclusions on this matter as TUI is not a member of the SOLAS Board and hence not privy to how events may unfold with respect to foreign language education.

### **Fees during Erasmus Plus years abroad**

Third level students undertaking study abroad are still required to pay fees to their 'home' higher education institution whilst abroad despite exerting no real cost factor on their 'home' higher education institution. Erasmus Plus provides a very valuable opportunity to students to further their education in recognised higher education institutions abroad whilst simultaneously learning about foreign languages and cultures. The abolition of fees during this year abroad would encourage more students to participate as cost is a significant barrier to them. Costs for students during this year are often higher than other years in third level as costs of flights, accommodation abroad etc. must be factored in.

TUI is happy to discuss the above points in greater detail should you feel it beneficial.

Ends

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