



Press Book

Launch of *One Voice For Languages*

**School of Education & School of Language,
Literature and Cultural Studies**

Thursday, 14 November, 2013

Introduction

The importance of language learning for employment, education and intercultural understanding was highlighted at the launch of a new group promoting language learning in Trinity College Dublin on Thursday, November 14th, 2013.

One Voice for Languages is a group of over 200 linguists, academics, teachers, parents, arts representatives and business leaders who have come together to highlight Ireland's deficit in 21st century language skills and the diminishing status of language learning in the Irish education system. The event hosted by Trinity's [School of Education](#) and [School of Languages, Literature and Cultural Studies](#) in Trinity Long Room Hub.

A media invite and press release were issued to national news desks and relevant journalists.

Broadcast Coverage

- **Adhmhaidin, Radio na Gaeltachta, Thursday, 14 November, 2013**

Print Coverage

- **See overleaf**



New campaign aims to boost languages in our education

ENGLISH is no longer enough - that is the message of a new campaign to give languages a greater voice in education.

The big focus on science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) has prompted concern that languages will get left behind.

While so-called STEM subjects are much in demand from employers, proficiency in foreign languages is also essential for many jobs.

Many businesses and industries operate in a global market, and their staff need to be able to communicate across the world.

Employers in Ireland regularly complain about the lack of home graduates with the necessary language skills.

Now the languages fightback has started, backed by more than 200 linguists, academics, teachers, parents and business leaders. It represents the first coming together of all levels of the education system, as well as business leaders and social entrepreneurs, to support language teaching and learning.

The One Voice for Languages campaign argues that employment is not the only reason for students to develop their linguistic skills.

They point to national and international research, demonstrating the direct benefits of language learning in boosting literacy, at both primary and post-primary level.

Proficiency in foreign languages also brings wider social and cultural benefits, they say.

French is the most popular language in the Leaving Certificate, taken by about 25,000 of over 55,000 candidates this year. A long way behind comes German, at about 6,600 candidates, Spanish with about 5,000, with Italian, Russian and Japanese trailing at around 300.

In the Leaving Certificate, male students are less likely to take languages than females.

Dr Ann Devitt, assistant professor in modern languages in Trinity College, said Ireland, with its own national language

and migrant populations had the potential to become a place of rich linguistic diversity.

But this potential wealth was not being developed, with only 40pc of Irish people claiming they could hold a conversation in any second language - the fourth lowest rate in Europe, she said.

Ireland is the only country in Europe, other than Scotland, where a non-indigenous language is not compulsory at any stage of the mainstream educational curriculum.

Katherine Donnelly
Education Editor

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Headline: Group highlights importance of Language Learning for jobs



Group highlights importance of language learning for jobs

A new group to highlight the importance of language learning for employment was launched in Trinity College Dublin yesterday.

Only 40 per cent of Irish people can hold a conversation in any second language, which is the fourth lowest rate in Europe.

One Voice for Languages is a group of more than 200 linguists, academics, teachers, parents, arts representatives and business leaders who have come together to “highlight Ireland’s deficit in 21st-century language skills”.

The group said language learning is important for employment, education and intercultural understanding. It also claimed language learning is the subject of a “diminishing status” in the Irish education system.

The group came together to raise awareness of the issue following “repeated calls” from industry leaders, employment specialists and experienced linguists.

Dr Ann Devitt said the group was seeking to “highlight how important languages are for Ireland, not only in terms of skills for the economy but also in terms of societal and cultural benefits”.

COLIN GLEESON



Speaking with one voice

Why do we have such a problem with modern languages?

Next month the Long Room at Trinity College Dublin will be home to a Babel of tongues as the many language-interest groups in Ireland come together to form a new advocacy movement for language learning.

Ireland is well behind other nations when it comes to languages, and we have no official language policy, beyond Irish, around which a movement for progress could coalesce. Modern languages are not compulsory at any stage of Irish schooling. Last year's budget saw the abolition of the Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative (MLPSI); our first foray into early-language learning never made it past the pilot stage. Hence the One Voice for Languages movement.

"We have seen what can happen when there is State support for a subject," says Kristin Brogan, a founder of One Voice and a lecturer in German, intercultural communication and EU projects at the Institute of Technology Tralee. "There has been a huge emphasis on science and technology over the past few years, and it has paid off in terms of uptake at postprimary and third level."

Brogan and the One Voice group want to light a similar fire under language learning, but, she admits, there are obstacles unique to Ireland. "There is a tendency to assume English is enough, that we don't need other languages. However, in Europe, the English language is like the European Computer Driving Licence. Everyone has it. Irish people competing for jobs in Europe are up against applicants with English, their own native language and often a third language as well."

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment is moving towards an integrated language curriculum at primary level, but the focus will be on English and Irish, with some element of language-skill learning. This, the NCCA hopes, will establish a sound foundation for the learning of a

foreign language in postprimary school. An integrated language curriculum would enable teachers to achieve learning efficiencies by explicitly drawing children's attention to similarities and differences between their languages".

But any hope that French, Spanish or German might find its way back into primary schools, where children are at the optimum age for new language acquisition, has been definitively extinguished.

"The decision to end the MLPSI was made in the context of a very challenging budgetary environment, where difficult decisions had to be taken," a spokesperson for the Department of Education told the *Irish Times*. "The programme ended in June 2012, and there are no plans to revisit this decision."

Irish-language lobby

Irish is the second challenge to modern-language learning in Ireland. Irish language groups will form part of One Voice, but the native tongue occupies a unique position that sets it apart from other languages in the Irish context. "We don't want to put down Irish," says Brogan. "It's a can of worms nobody wants to open."

In theory, the learning of Irish should complement further language acquisition, but in reality, for Ireland, it doesn't. Before the abolition of the MLPSI, just 1 per cent of Irish primary-school children were learning a modern language, compared to an EU average of 79 per cent.

Roughly two-thirds of Irish postprimary students take a modern language. In the UK it is compulsory until the age of 16. By third level, uptake here has dropped again, to

around 3 per cent.

A 2012 European Commission report revealed that only in Britain, Portugal, Italy and Hungary can fewer adults hold a conversation in an additional language. In Ireland, 40 per cent have a second language, but that includes those who can speak Irish. This

compares with a 54 per cent EU average, but the figure is more than 90 per cent in the Netherlands and Sweden.

Brogan admits educationalists will not be able to force the Government's hand on a modern-languages policy. The language of money is the only one that's ever heard, and there is no shortage of companies highlighting the language deficit here. Apple, eBay, Facebook, Google, LinkedIn, Oracle, PayPal and Dropbox have their Europe, Middle East and Africa headquarters here, and are all recruiting outside Ireland to fill their language needs. Amazon, IBM and Twitter have headquartered their European operations here. Currently, there are 2,000 vacancies for speakers of German in Dublin, and companies are starting to move some of their departments to eastern Europe, where they can find appropriate language skills.

This is a measurable loss to the Irish economy. What is harder to quantify is the potential growth Ireland is missing out on. Tony Donoghue of Ibec believes that Irish SMEs, particularly export companies, are the biggest losers. "The tendency among many Irish exporters is to avoid markets where language is a barrier. If we had more speakers of German, French and Spanish work-

ing in our SMEs it could open up so many doors. Over 75 per cent of the world's population do not speak English, and only 9 per cent speak English as their first language. If we neglect to ensure adequate availability of foreign language skills in Ireland, the opportunities of this global market for our indigenous exporting companies will not be realised."

Six years ago the European Council's language-policy division warned: "The main challenge for Ireland is to move away from 'an official but lame bilingualism' to become a truly multilingual society, where the ability to learn and use two and more languages is taken for granted and fostered at every stage of the education system and through lifelong education."

Mickael Lenglet of the Alliance Française says that although there is more to gain from language learning than boosted job prospects, the Irish will not be at the races at all if we don't catch up in this area. "Ireland is the only European country not to have compulsory teaching of a foreign language in primary school. Being bilingual in business is normal; a third language will soon be unavoidable. How can Irish people meet the expectations abroad, or in the Irish market, if their knowledge of foreign languages is behind the rest of Europe?"

Louise Holden

“The European Council warned: ‘The main challenge for Ireland is to move away from an official but lame bilingualism’



Listening to the neighbours The UK is working on modern-language uptake

Part of our complacency around foreign-language learning in Ireland is down to the fact that we use English, one of the most widely spoken languages in the world.

But even our nearest neighbour, the most native of English speakers, is starting to recognise what it's missing out on by languishing at the bottom of the modern-languages league.

In 1988 the UK government made a second language compulsory at lower secondary level, and modern languages are now taught in most primary schools. Despite this, the UK has a stubbornly low level of proficiency. This month the European Commission hosted a conference, 'No Island Is an Island: European Perspectives on Language Learning in Britain'.

According to the event organisers, the UK has the worst foreign-language skills in

Europe – worse than in Ireland, where 40 per cent of the population can hold a conversation in two languages, if you include Irish. The thinking in the UK now is that limited language abilities and cultural awareness are acting in effect as a tax on UK trade.

The UK government has decided to grab this one by the throat and place language learning on a robust policy footing. Last year its department of education announced its intention to make languages compulsory at key stage 2 (children between seven and 11). In February the government published its proposals for the national curriculum in key stages 2 and 3 (lower secondary), setting high standards for achievement in modern languages. It's a move worth watching here, where we do not currently prioritise modern-language learning at all.



■ Mollie Nic Giolla Bhríde and Alex O'Ceallagáin protest in 2011 against a proposal to make Irish optional for the Leaving Cert. PHOTOGRAPH: BRYAN O'BRIEN

53,749

Number of students who sat Leaving Cert language exams this year

797

Number of students who sat Leaving Cert Polish

44,420

Number of students who sat Leaving Cert Irish

377

Number of students who sat Leaving Cert Italian

26,061

Number of students who sat Leaving Cert French

310

Number of students who sat Leaving Cert Russian

6,770

Number of students who sat Leaving Cert German

277

Number of students who sat Leaving Cert Japanese

5,021

Number of students who sat Leaving Cert Spanish

593

Total number who sat Lithuanian, Romanian, Latvian and Portuguese



■ Language class: Perrine Verniers teaches students French at the Alliance Française in Dublin. PHOTOGRAPH: ALAN BETSON