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Foreign Language Learning and Ireland's *Languages Connect* Strategy

Reflections following a symposium organised
by the National University of Ireland with
University College Cork



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5. *Languages Connect*: Addressing a Missing Experiential Dimension

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Languages Connect: Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026 (henceforth *Languages Connect*) has been eagerly anticipated by individuals involved in foreign language teaching and learning at all levels of Ireland's education system, and with its publication in December 2017 much positivity has been expressed about the direction of the strategy and its very ambitious goals. Since its publication, practitioners and researchers across the system have analysed the strategy and identified several areas in need of urgent address, some of which can be seen to fall under what may be termed the 'experiential dimension'.

While the consultation process underlying the development of the strategy was certainly broad and far reaching, there remain some key areas where further discussion and refinement is required if the strategy is to have any chance of achieving its highly ambitious and noble aims. I will outline briefly three priority areas where the strategy requires refinement in terms of harnessing the value of experiences within the system: integration of third-level representation of language practitioners and researchers into the 'Foreign Language Advisory Group (FLAG)', current pressures on the third-level language provision, and current configuration of post-primary teacher-training programmes.

Languages Connect is for all intents and purposes a national language policy, where language policy is understood in its broadest theoretical sense as 'the set of positions, principles and decisions reflecting that community's relationships to its verbal repertoire and communicative potential' (Bugarski 1992, p. 18). Language policy is thus viewed as a set of guiding principles on desired language behaviour within a jurisdiction, open to multiple interpretations by those affected by and involved in it. Herein lies the first area in which the strategy requires further refinement in an area of key importance.

FLAG is charged with monitoring and overseeing the implementation of the policy. According to policy documentation, the group is comprised of 'relevant stakeholders' and includes representation from the areas of curriculum development and monitoring, employers, school management, government departments, the Higher Education Authority, students and professional teacher organisations, to name but a few. The composition of such a group is in line with best practice of language policy formulation and implementation as it incorporates 'the consumers of policy, who use or resist the languages dictated to them from the top down, [and] have something to say from the bottom up...[who] need to be heard and incorporated in the formulation of policy...[as] such an effort may lead to a more valid type of language policy' (Shohamy 2009, p. 188).

Most notably within the higher education context however, there is a clear absence of representation from any of the country's university-level language departments/schools. These units play a central role in the system, not only in their daily practices which contribute greatly to producing ever more important foreign language graduates for industry and graduates to enter the country's postgraduate teacher-training programme, but also by actively engaging in scholarly research and discourse on pertinent areas including second language acquisition, language policy and planning, and language pedagogy. Their exclusion from FLAG renders their voices and perspectives as practitioners and researchers mute which has serious implications for the efficacy of the policy. Given this impactful deficit in the composition of FLAG, the group should be reviewed and expanded as a matter of urgency to include representation of third-level practitioners and researchers, for which there is precedent in *Languages Connect*: 'The membership of the Group will be reviewed during the lifecycle of the implementation of the Strategy to ensure continued relevance and additional members may be co-opted onto the Group as the need arises' (Department of Education, 2017b, 2).

5. *Languages Connect*: Addressing a Missing Experiential Dimension

The current foreign language provision at higher education level in Ireland is characterised by challenges and competing pressures. Principal amongst them is the significant pressure already exerted on the staffing levels needed to deliver on current demands for certain languages at different levels. Many language departments and schools throughout the Irish higher education system are experiencing growing demand for provision across levels (post-Leaving Certificate and *ab initio*) in the core student cohort, and indeed in additional student cohorts within Institution-Wide Language Provisions (IWLPs). In the area of *ab initio* language provision, there are already considerable challenges in the recruitment of suitably qualified and experienced practitioners to meet levels of student demand, and to provide the contact hours necessary to facilitate students' linguistic development. There is significant experiential evidence from discussions within professional modern foreign language (MFL) networks nationwide to suggest that Schools/Departments of Modern Languages are finding it increasingly difficult to find suitably qualified and experienced practitioners. For years, many managers of foreign language units have resorted to exhausting personal and professional networks to source individuals capable of delivering on foreign language teaching at higher education level. This in itself is fraught with challenges and difficulties such as sufficient pay levels to attract suitable individuals, continuity of staff from one academic year to the next, restrictions set by universities on the maximum number of hours that can be allocated to occasional staff members, inability to provide sufficient cover for illness staff members, and so on. Anecdotal evidence from multiple higher education contexts suggests that the situation has become so precarious in some units that undergraduate and postgraduate native speaker students on Erasmus exchanges within the institutions are being used in a desperate bid to plug the recruitment gaps and to meet the demand from students already pursuing foreign language learning.

Languages Connect states that approximately only 4% of all university students currently pursue foreign language learning in some capacity at university level, and aims to increase this to 20% within the next 7 years (Department of Education, 2017a, 31). In this context, clearly the recruitment issue already reaching crisis levels will need immediate attention in the form of additional funding to language departments/schools to source and recruit qualified and experienced staff, and to provide incumbent higher education language educators with opportunities for continuous professional development (CPD), in order to develop an even more rigorous and quality foreign language provision at university level.

Finally, while *Languages Connect* makes important recommendations in a number of areas, an area remaining unaddressed is the current arrangements within Professional Masters in Education (PME) programmes with regard to target language exposure. Arguably, it stands to reason that the structure and content of PME programmes have far-reaching impact on language teaching within secondary level in Ireland given the PME's key gatekeeper function for accredited status within the system. The minutes of the FLAG meeting on 22nd May 2018 outline a very welcome development in the form of undergraduate language programmes with an explicit teaching orientation being developed at some higher education institutions; no reference is made in the document, however, to current practices within PME programmes. From analysing the publicly available programme information published on institutional websites and correspondence with current trainee teachers on PME programmes throughout Ireland, it has been found that students enrolled on all but one PME accredited in Irish higher education have no institutionalised exposure to the target language which they are training to teach. Students spend 3-4 years at undergraduate level working intensively on their language proficiency for entry to PME programmes. Once admitted onto such programmes, students have no institutionalised exposure to the foreign language during their training which flies in the face of best practice derived from empirical studies in second language acquisition where continuity of exposure and consistent

use of the target language are key to ensuring that linguistic stagnation, or worse yet regression, do not occur. Furthermore, the position of the Department of Education and Skills, and its Inspectorate (the division of the Department of Education and Skills responsible for the evaluation of primary and post-primary schools and centres for education) is that the target language should be used 'where possible' (Inspectorate 2019, p. 9). The phrase 'where possible' is arguably viewed by those working on the ground as closer to 'as much as possible', given that target-language usage within the classroom is listed foremost in almost all published inspection reports, highlighting, for good and for bad, the importance attributed to the practice by the Inspectorate. Riordan (2015) also notes that teacher trainers have come to interpret Inspectorate guidelines on target-language use as an 'aim of 100% target language use', so that the trainers 'would expect the students [trainee teachers] to teach in L2 so using the target language in the classroom' (p. 171). In light of such, it is extremely paradoxical that trainee teachers are not given the opportunity to maintain their linguistic proficiency by means of exposure to their foreign languages during their training but are then expected to adopt a target-language teaching approach in their role as accredited teachers. To address this anomaly, Schools/Departments of Education within higher education institutions should seek to harness and build on synergies that often already exist with Schools/Departments of Modern Languages where there is a genuine interest in, and passion for supporting foreign languages across the entire education system. Such Schools/Departments could make an important contribution to evaluating (for example, on teacher placement) and maintaining trainee teachers' linguistic proficiency within their PME programmes, and thus improve quality overall. Most language departments/school also have researchers in situ who actively pursue research and publish in the fields of language pedagogy and second language acquisition, creating scope for implementing a content and language integrated learning (CLIL) approach to language pedagogy on PME programmes, CLIL is an approach advocated in *Languages Connect* for potential implementation at post-primary level by teachers.

This discussion has sought to highlight reasons why language policy development and implementation must recognise the central importance of the experiential dimension within the current secondary and tertiary systems. If *Languages Connect* successfully takes account of and harnesses the value of experience throughout its lifecycle, it will undoubtedly make a significant and lasting contribution to the Irish education system, and the society it serves.

5. *Languages Connect:* Addressing a Missing Experiential Dimension

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