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Re-Imagining Academic and Professional Irish Language Programmes in Initial Teacher Education: Implications of a New Third Level Irish Language Syllabus

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Abstract

In 2008, a national working group was established in Ireland with the objective of producing a new third level Irish-language syllabus based on the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (Council of Europe, 2001). The need for such a syllabus was widely acknowledged by third level teachers of Irish, in particular by those working in Irish Departments in the Colleges of Education. This article documents the progress of the Syllabus Project initiated by the national working group, and addresses in particular the question of linguistic diversity among student teachers preparing for a career in the primary school sector. The author considers language teaching in the debate about initial teacher education models, the policy background to the Syllabus Project, pedagogy and practice in piloting the new syllabus, and future perspectives on third level Irish-language course provision.

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Introduction¹

In 2008, a national working group, An Mheitheal um Theagasc na Gaeilge ar an Tríú Leibhéal (The Working Party for the Teaching of Irish at Third Level), was established in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin, with the objective of producing a new third level Irish-language syllabus based on the Council of Europe's publication *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (2001). The need for such a syllabus was widely acknowledged by third level teachers of Irish, in particular by those working in Irish Departments in the Colleges of Education, where there was, and still is, a particular challenge involved in ensuring that student teachers of diverse linguistic backgrounds and language learning experiences achieve an appropriate level of competence during the course of their initial teacher education programme. This article documents the progress of the Syllabus Project initiated by the working group, and addresses in particular the question of linguistic diversity among student teachers preparing for a career in the primary school sector. The article was written in the context of the concurrent model of initial teacher education which was in place in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, from the mid-1970s until 2012, where Academic Irish as a subject specialisation provided an effective learning pathway for students with higher levels of Irish language proficiency, while also catering for the need for subject specialists at system level. Under this BEd structure, students studied Education as an academic major (60% of degree programme credits) and a Humanities subject as an academic minor (40% of degree programme credits). For many years prior to the dismantling of the model, approximately 25% of each cohort of BEd students chose Irish as a Humanities specialism to degree level. Those students who chose other Humanities specialisms took a Professional Irish course, which was a pass-fail unit within the degree structure. This model was disbanded in the move to a four-year undergraduate BEd programme in 2012, whose structure was based on the principles outlined in the Teaching Council of Ireland's *Initial Teacher Education: Criteria and Guidelines for Programme Providers* (2011). Some of the implications for the Irish language of the standard model now in use in all undergraduate initial teacher education programmes in Ireland will be referred to in this article, with special reference to the author's experience of the changes in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra.

The discussion will be divided into four inter-related sections: Language teaching in the debate about initial teacher education models; Perspectives and policy – the background to the Syllabus Project; Pedagogy and practice – piloting the New Syllabus in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra; and Planning for best practice – where do we go from here?

Language teaching in the debate about initial teacher education models

Linguistic competence and the achievement of high level oral and literacy skills were central to the Academic Irish programme in the BEd degree in St Patrick's College. Its objective was the development of deeper linguistic, sociolinguistic, and cultural knowledge and understanding through the study to degree level of a wide range of

¹ This article was first presented as a paper at the 'Re-imagining Initial Teacher Education' conference at St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin, in summer 2011. It should be noted that the four-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) referred to has commenced since September 2012, with the first cohort of students graduating in 2016. The BEd now has a common structure throughout the ITE primary sector. In addition, the Syllabus Project described is now complete (Stage 3 was completed in January 2011). References to a BA programme in the article allude to the BA in Humanities as taught in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, up to 2015 when the DCU Joint Honours BA model was adopted. Language syllabi and sample teaching and learning materials for a three-year undergraduate programme mentioned in the article are available at <http://www.teagascnaGaeilge.ie>.

linguistic, literary and cultural subject content. The function of the Professional Irish programme, on the other hand, was the achievement of operational proficiency in BEd student teachers. The focus of the programme was linguistic competence, and the development of a positive disposition towards the subject among students.

The model of initial teacher education which allowed students this choice of academic pathway was discontinued in 2012, as Colleges of Education were required to re-conceptualise and reconfigure their programmes in line with what was deemed to be current thinking in initial teacher education. Yet there was no consensus about what was *good* current thinking in relation to the issue of subject specialisation in preparing students for primary level teaching. Indeed it is worth noting that there was a dramatic increase around this time in the provision of places on post-graduate initial teacher education programmes for primary teaching, reflecting an understanding that diversity of student teachers' academic background and educational experience would be beneficial to the development of the sector. Contradictory positions in relation to the issue of subject specialisation were common in the educational discourse, with Graham Donaldson's comprehensive review of teacher education in Scotland advocating the introduction of subject specialisation into BEd programmes and the exposure of student teachers to the work of university disciplines and faculties outside of Education (Donaldson, 2010), while the Teaching Council of Ireland (2011) and the Irish Department of Education and Skills (2011) were insisting on the discontinuation of the Humanities subject specialisation in those concurrent programmes of initial teacher education where such choice had been available. This latter stance was adopted in the absence of any substantial empirical evidence that any one particular model of initial teacher education was more effective than another.

Research on the role of subject specialisation in teacher education for primary level in Ireland is sparse and inconclusive, is based almost exclusively on subjective reporting of student perceptions and preferences, and is largely unpublished. Studies that focus on time-on-task tend to denigrate the importance of subject specialisation, indicating that student teachers are spending too much time on academic areas deemed to be irrelevant to Education or peripheral to students' future roles as primary school teachers (Burke, 2008a; 2008b). On the other hand, a study of BEd graduates that focused on satisfaction with course content indicated that the area of study of greatest personal satisfaction was the Humanities subject (Morgan and O'Leary, 2003; 2008). One would expect this latter research, which has tended to be ignored in public discussion of the issue (Burke, 2010, for example), to be taken into account in education policy initiatives, especially if the importance of student teachers' personal values, emotions, beliefs and aspirations was to be acknowledged in teacher education programmes (Korthagen, 2011). However, it appears that the main criterion considered valid by policy makers in their evaluation of initial teacher education programmes is measurable evidence of knowledge or skill transfer to the primary classroom. Therefore, the most sceptical reading of the effectiveness of subject specialisation as a predictor of performance in primary-school teaching was still being cited as convincing evidence in favour of discontinuing subject specialisation (Greaney, Burke and McCann, 1999). In this instance, the authors' conclusion was based on a limited base of data pertaining to a cohort of teachers entering the BEd programme in 1979 (see Greaney, Burke, and McCann, 1987 for a full account of the cohort). In contrast to the very sparse research base in relation to this issue, there is a large and growing body of national and international academic research evidence available to inform planning on language teaching and learning (see Harris and Ó Duibhir, 2010). This research has not informed Irish language education policy in a significant manner to date.

Language teaching is a curricular area where there is an irrefutable link between subject proficiency and teacher effectiveness. While language competence is not sufficient to ensure effective language teaching, it is an essential component of it. Pedagogic competence is also essential; but equally important are the affective issues that shape emerging teacher identity. These are only beginning to be theorised in the context of language teaching (Varghese et al., 2005), and have scarcely been acknowledged at all in discussion on the role of the Irish language in teacher education programmes. The Syllabus Project documented in this article provides us with an opportunity to address this lacuna.

Perspectives and policy: background to the Syllabus Project

Concerns about the effectiveness of Irish-language courses in initial teacher education have been expressed in several fora and formats over the last ten years, and have been articulated by various professional, academic communities, in the context of national and international policy perspectives. Concerns about the linguistic competence of teachers are often presented in the literature as part of a more general discussion of teacher competence and pupil learning outcomes. This is the case in the research carried out by Harris et al. (2006), where 25% of practising teachers self-report as having poor oral ability in Irish, and in the Inspectorate's 2007 report on the teaching of Irish in primary school where 23% of the teachers are reported to have either poor (3%) or fair (20%) oral ability in the language (Inspectorate, 2007). Teacher education is also addressed in the Council of Europe Language Policy Division *Language Education Policy Profile: Ireland* (2007), where concern is expressed about teacher competence, and the ability of Irish third level colleges to produce teacher competence in language students entering the colleges with minimum entry requirements. In addressing the need for 'an integrated, coherent, language in education policy', this Policy Profile draws on the principles stated in the Council of Europe *Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe* (2007), and the teaching of Irish and English in Ireland are seen as part of a larger European plurilingual 'language in education' project. This important policy review document was scarcely discussed at all in Irish educational and education policy circles, and its insights in relation to plurilingual competences were ignored in the Department of Education and Skills national strategy document *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (2011).

The Irish-language community perspective also needs to be considered here. Concerns about the linguistic competence of qualified teachers have been expressed by groups with a responsibility to the Irish-medium sector, particularly in recent years in research reports published by An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (Mac Donnacha et al., 2005; Ó Flatharta, 2007). These concerns are about the provision of an adequate supply of teachers for Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools at one level, but they are also part of a broader educational rights issue in relation to the educational continuum and the learning needs of students who emerge from those schools. Are the learning and literacy needs of native speakers and students with high levels of second language (L2) proficiency to be taken into account in third level syllabi? How are their language and literacy education needs to be met? The perspective of committed practitioners at all levels of the educational system is also important. These were foregrounded in a conference about the teaching and learning of Irish at second and third level, co-organised by Coiste Náisiúnta Léann na Gaeilge of the Royal Irish Academy, and the professional organisation of Irish language teachers, Comhar na Múinteoirí Gaeilge, that was held in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, in 2001. Though the conference was well attended, and the proceedings published (Ó Laoire, 2003; Ó Murchú, 2003), it was not followed up by

any particular research or teaching and learning initiative, and there remained a general feeling that the issues raised there for the teaching of Irish at third level needed to be teased out in greater detail.

Concerns about standards became more obvious in recent years as Irish Departments in the universities and Colleges of Education went through rigorous Quality Assurance processes which included close scrutiny and peer-review of their language teaching and learning activities. It was in such a context that a national forum on the teaching and learning of Irish at third level was organised by the Irish Department in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, in 2008. At this forum, presentations were made about the current state of language teaching and learning in academic Irish Departments in all the major universities and Colleges of Education on the island. These were followed by specialist lectures on syllabus design, training, and assessment, on the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching and assessment* (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001), on the potential of Computer Assisted Language Learning, and on creative multi-media projects involving collaboration between Colleges of Education, schools and Gaeltacht communities (Ní Fhrighil and Nic Eoin, 2009). Concern for student learning was central to the discussion and the forum was pivotal in galvanising commitment to work together for change in third level Irish language teaching. Before the conference closed, a national working group, An Mheitheal um Theagasc na Gaeilge ar an Tríú Leibhéal, was established, with representation from all participating institutions. It was agreed that the working group would produce a new third level Irish-language syllabus, based on the CEFR. The decision to design a syllabus based on the CEFR was made for a number of reasons. It is generally recognised that the CEFR is the best international Framework of Reference currently available for the learning of languages in a European context (Little 2002, 2006, 2008; North, 2008). The CEFR, and its associated European Language Portfolio, was already being used in the teaching of European languages in the third level sector in Ireland and internationally (Ruane and Gauthier, 2006), and in the context of the Professional Diploma in Education (PDE) programme at NUI Galway (Farren, 2008), and its usefulness recognised in the design of programmes and the writing of language Learning Outcomes in the context of the Bologna Process (Tudor, 2004). It was recognised that the work would benefit from the experience gained by the innovative Teastas Eorpach sa Ghaeilge (TEG) project in NUI Maynooth, a highly successful example of the production of Irish-language syllabi, learning materials and assessment processes for adult learners, based on the CEFR (Ní Ghallachair, 2008). Where initial teacher education is concerned, the huge value of a third level syllabus based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages is that it promotes a learner-centred and action-oriented approach. Learning outcomes can be clearly related to desired professional and academic competences, and the Language Portfolio serves as an adaptable reflective tool promoting learner responsibility and learner autonomy.

In 2009, the working group secured funding for a National Syllabus Project from the Irish language body, Foras na Gaeilge. With applied linguist Ailín Ní Chonchúir as Project Manager, and the support and assistance of a core group of language pedagogy and syllabus design experts within the consortium (An Mheitheal Siollabais), the Project resulted in the online publication of a new undergraduate Third Level Syllabus and accompanying sample teaching and learning materials (see www.teagascnagaeilge.ie; for an account of Stage 1 of the Project, see Walsh and Nic Eoin, 2010). The key steps leading to the publication of the new syllabus were needs analysis (based on research undertaken in four participating colleges, two universities and two Colleges of Education); syllabus design, based on Level B2 of the CEFR; the

design, production and digital publication of multi-media sample teaching and learning materials (with participating university, the University of Ulster, taking responsibility for the digital publication of the materials); and information sessions for participating institutions. The main finding from the needs analysis research was that there was a great diversity in levels of language awareness and language proficiency in all the colleges and a need to plan for differential provision within any new syllabus based on a third level degree structure.

Pedagogy and practice: piloting the new syllabus

The new First Year Syllabus was introduced with first year BA and BEd students in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, in October 2009. It was also introduced at that time in Mary Immaculate College of Education in Limerick, and in autumn 2010 in NUI Maynooth. Other participating Colleges also developed their language courses using the new syllabus, re-writing Learning Outcomes, adapting the sample teaching and learning materials, and embedding them in their own language programmes. At the earliest stages of the project, the process of implementation was monitored closely and feedback from staff and students provided the working group with useful insights into what needed to be done to improve provision across the third level and initial teacher education sectors. Focus groups were carried out in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, with teaching staff working with first year students, and with first year students themselves, in the second half of the 2009-10 academic year. Though an initial training course had been provided at the beginning of the academic year for staff teaching first year students, the implementation of the new language course was pedagogically challenging for lecturers and tutors used to teaching a narrower grammar-focused programme, with the grammar textbook as the main teaching and learning resource. They now had to become familiar with new materials, with a task-based and text-based approach, with the formal monitoring of students' work, with individual error analysis, with the use of multi-media materials, with the assessment of oral language submitted electronically, and with the management of student learning portfolios. There were also a number of seriously constricting administrative and resource constraints which accounted for some of the frustrations communicated by tutors. Successful implementation of the New Syllabus required the availability of a double teaching session, for example, but in the initial period of implementation, it was not possible to provide this double session for first year BEd students. The most salient administrative problem with pedagogical implications, however, was that it was not deemed possible to group students in their language seminars according to linguistic background or prior language learning, so the full spectrum of standard and motivation could be encountered by a tutor within any one seminar group. The New Syllabus is based on Level B2 of the CEFR. This level – the upper end of the Independent User band (Council of Europe, 2001) – was deemed by the applied linguistics and pedagogic experts comprising 'An Mheitheal Siollabais' to be the most appropriate level on which to base a third level Irish-language syllabus designed for students who had achieved Honours marks in the Leaving Certificate examination and who were on career paths in which a high level of competence in the language would be required. However, this choice was not unproblematic as the Leaving Certificate Irish language syllabus is not based on the CEFR, there is great diversity between the lowest and highest grades within Leaving Certificate Honours bands, and the validity of the Leaving Certificate Honours examination as an indicator of linguistic competence has itself been questioned in recent research (Stack, 2010). A further difficulty is provided by the fact that BA students in the Colleges of Education could access a First Year Academic Irish programme without the entry requirements necessary for an Initial Teacher Education programme. Indeed, most First Year

classes (be they BA or BEd) include students for whom a Syllabus based on lower levels of the CEFR would be more appropriate.

The focus groups with tutors, which were carried out on 1 February 2010, discussed the following aspects of the new programme: the New Syllabus, topics and learning outcomes, sample teaching and learning materials, preparation and classroom management, the role of grammar instruction, the Learning Portfolio, and Assessment. The most salient points of satisfaction to emerge from the discussion were: the quality of the Syllabus; the centrality of authentic and semi-authentic print, audio and video language learning materials; the relevance and student-centredness of the syllabus topics; the opportunities for enhanced student involvement and responsibility for their own learning; the integrated approach to the four key language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing); and the Learning Portfolio as focus of student engagement. Tutors acknowledged that they experienced difficulties, especially in relation to the implications of the New Syllabus for their own classroom practice. Particular sources of dissatisfaction or frustration were: the perceived need to 'cover everything' included in the sample teaching and learning materials; the time required to prepare lessons and to deal with continuous assessment and error analysis (grading and providing feedback for Learning Portfolio tasks); the challenge of integrating material and teaching grammar 'in context'; the difficulty of the subject matter for some students and the challenges of dealing with diversity of standard within seminar groups; the challenge of dealing with technology, including the use of video materials in the classroom, and dealing with electronically submitted oral tasks. Some of the issues to emerge in the tutor focus groups were resource issues beyond the control of the Irish Department. Others were organisational and management issues that were subsequently ameliorated or resolved. Others again were pedagogic issues associated with aspects of the new courses (the teaching of grammar in context, promoting learner reflection, dealing with error analysis, for example), and these were subsequently addressed in staff training sessions.

Let us now turn to the findings of the student focus groups. A First Year BA focus group was held on 15 March 2010, and a BEd focus group on 4 May 2010 (at which stage the students had already completed their end of year Oral Examination). The students invited to participate were students identified by their tutors as students who would be confident enough to express opinions in a focus group conducted through Irish. While they were not chosen on the grounds of linguistic competence, nevertheless both groups consisted of students who were comfortable speaking in Irish to the focus group facilitator, and therefore are not representative of the group as a whole, something the BA students themselves alluded to. The salient issues to emerge from the student focus groups were a recognition that the course was designed to meet their learning needs; satisfaction with the course topics and the diversity of tasks; an awareness of their own responsibility as third level language learners; an appreciation of the tutors' role as facilitators of their learning; and an appreciation of the integrated nature of course content. The main concerns expressed by the students centred around the relationship between classroom activities, students' work outside of the classroom, and course assessment. The difficulty of the material for some students was acknowledged, as was the challenge for students of reflecting on their learning, and communicating this reflection in writing (as required for the Learning Portfolio). The relationship between seminar work and the end of year examination was unclear, and this was not surprising as the written assessment had not been revised substantially in the light of the introduction of the New Syllabus. The timing of the oral examinations was problematic, because they were scheduled for a date prior to the completion of the course, leaving students with no opportunity to review the year's work.

Interestingly, though it wasn't raised directly by the focus group facilitator, the issue of the Leaving Certificate style of rote learning emerged during one of the sessions when a student interrupted another who was praising the varied and student-centred nature of the first year course topics and tasks. His interjection, A, was responded to immediately by the first student, B:

A 'Ba chóir go mbeadh níos mó, díriú, like ar...cúrsaí an domhain, like, an recession agus... I dunno...'

B 'Ní aontaím leis, nílimid ag iarraidh dul ar ais go dtí an Ardteist nuair a dheineamar rudaí de ghlanmheabhair...'

A 'Bhuel, conas is féidir linn a bheith ag caint faoin recession muna mbíonn an...'

B 'Rinneamar é sin, déanamar gach rud mar sin de ghlanmheabhair i gcóir an Ardteist, níl mé ag iarraidh dul ar ais go dtí an rud sin.'

Another student, in describing her own approach to the course tasks, recalled how, in the course of the year, she began to take control of her own learning, leaving behind the practice of submitting tasks and subsequently ignoring tutor feedback:

[...] like scríobhaimid amach go léir, like, na ceartúcháin a dhéanaimid ... like, sin an méid, like, tugann tú an bileog don múinteoir, don teagascóir, like, agus ní dhéanann tú aon rud like tar éis é a fháil ar ais, ach thosaigh mé, like, ag scríobh amach na ceartúcháin, like, an ceartú agus iad a chur suas ar mo bhalla, agus sin an chaoi a mbíonn mé, like, ábalta, like, rudaí a fhoghlaim, like, bím i gcónaí ag rá iad nó ag féachaint orthu ina dhiaidh [...]

As a result of the focus group findings the first year course was reconfigured again during the 2010-11 academic year and adjustments made to the assessment procedures. A number of training sessions for tutors were organised to address the issues raised in the 2010 focus groups. Focus groups for tutors and students were organised again at the end of the 2011 academic year, and it was intended that these would form part of a more comprehensive review of the implementation process at a later date. What was clear at this stage was that the structural and management issues were still dominant. Another issue that was articulated was a sense of loss of teacher autonomy as tutors were expected to adhere to standardised course instructions. This is a common concern in third level teaching where the principle of academic freedom is also seen to extend to language teaching. From the students' perspective there is clearly a need for a standardised approach to course content and continuous assessment (especially the tasks to be included in the Learning Portfolio). From the tutors' perspective, there is a need to customise course content and adapt classroom practice to cater for diverse ability levels within particular student groups. These are very real challenges, and to overcome them, planning for best practice in language learning has to occur in an integrated manner as part of a national commitment to plurilingualism and language education.

Planning for best practice: where do we go from here?

This final section takes the form of a series of proposals, which, it is argued, should be taken into account when reviewing the language education components of the extended and reconfigured BEd programmes introduced in 2012. The need for such a review is urgent because, despite the belief in certain quarters that restructured programmes would actually lead to an enhancement of Professional Irish provision, or to the development of curriculum-based modules in Irish (based on the principles of

Content and Language Integrated Learning) for students with high levels of linguistic competence, such enhancement of Irish-language provision has not occurred. Instead, Professional Irish modules tend to carry very little ECTS credit weighting within the extended degree programmes, and their incorporation within generic Language and Literacy Education modules has led to a reduction in opportunities to assess student teachers' own language learning as they progress through the programme. This has serious implications for the implementation of a graded and integrated language syllabus. The question of academic responsibility for language learning outcomes in initial teacher education and recognition of the expertise of Irish Department staff servicing Education programmes also needs to be part of this review. The proposals below are also of immediate relevance to the issue of linguistic competence achieved by students undertaking BA programmes in Irish, an issue recognised by the Teaching Council of Ireland's current requirement that language graduates wishing to pursue Professional Masters in Education programmes provide proof of competence at Level B2 of the CEFR.

National standards:

- Align state language curricula at all levels with the CEFR.
- Use the CEFR and the New Irish Language Third Level Syllabus to agree national learning outcomes for Irish-language teachers.
- Review and standardise marks and standards and assessment procedures for language learning throughout the initial teacher education sector, using TEG processes and standardised testing materials as a model of best practice.
- Provide regular continuous professional development modules for practising teachers to facilitate ongoing self-evaluation and alignment with CEFR descriptors at Level B2.

Models of course provision:

- Ensure that there is differential provision on initial teacher education programmes, taking cognizance of the diverse linguistic backgrounds and prior language learning experiences of student teachers.
- Ensure that credit weightings for Professional Irish modules on initial teacher education programmes are reflective of the learning path required of students to progress from minimum course entry requirement to professional competence.
- Acknowledge the importance for national language education of different models of initial teacher education, and in particular the different roles of professional Irish and more specialist academic Irish modules within initial teacher education programmes.
- Ensure that the principles of Content and Language Integrated Learning are embedded across all curricular areas in initial teacher education for the primary sector.

The need for diversity of provision within the initial teacher education sector is nowhere more obvious than in language learning. Where student teachers' relationship with the Irish language is concerned, it is not just a question of what students 'can do' linguistically when they enter a programme (i.e. students' linguistic competence), but also who they are, what they believe, what inspires them and what they aspire to (Korthagen, 2011). The question of student motivation is central to the success of third level language teaching programmes. Where the teaching and learning of Irish is concerned, there is an urgent need for research on learner motivation, learner confidence and learner strategies similar to what has been carried out for the teaching

of other languages (see, for example Hoare, 2007; Simon, 2008). The development of a new Third Level Irish Language Syllabus based on the CEFR has created a new context in which to examine issues of learner awareness, learner involvement and learner autonomy, and the implementation of the Syllabus in a range of third level settings offers a fresh opportunity to open up these applied linguistic research strands (see Ó Dónaill, 2009; Ní Fhrighil, 2010; Ó Laoire and Ní Chlochasaigh, 2010). While the CEFR is particularly useful in developing learners' awareness of their own position on a competence scale, its emphasis on the personal learning process, on language learning as a continuum and on the relationship between the personal, linguistic, sociolinguistic, and cultural contexts of language learning makes it a truly valuable resource in initial teacher education. However, the question of the resources required by Irish Departments if they are to develop learner awareness, learner involvement, and target language use needs to be seriously addressed. Unless it is addressed, it is futile to expect that we will succeed in creating reflective language teachers. In this respect, we should apply the Teaching Council of Ireland's commitment to the individual pupil to the learning needs of the individual student teacher. The graduate of a teacher education programme is expected to 'apply knowledge of the individual potential of pupils, dispositions towards learning, varying backgrounds, identities, experiences and learning styles to planning for teaching, learning and assessment' (Teaching Council, 2011). By the same token, teaching staff in the Colleges of Education or in universities with initial teacher education programmes need to be in a position to address the individual learning needs of their students, who come to college with diverse learning experiences, dispositions and expectations. If we are serious about catering for student diversity, language departments need resources for general and more specialist language courses. Diverse language courses will support and complement the general 'Irish as L2' methodology courses, and the more specialist 'Irish as L1' and immersion education electives offered by Education Department language pedagogy experts. Resource levels in the colleges and universities need to be such that the learning outcomes for true professional competence, C1: Effective Operational Proficiency on the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), are actually achievable during the course of an initial teacher education programme. With this in mind, it is imperative that full-time staff-student ratios in language departments in Ireland are at a level that is in line with best practice in university language and language education departments internationally. It is encouraging that the Teaching Council of Ireland recommends a staff-student ratio of 1:15 on initial teacher education programmes thus allowing 'for small group work, for the modelling of effective teaching methodologies and for teaching the skills necessary for meaningful reflective practice' (2011:18). In planning for best practice in language education, this is a core issue. Another issue for initial teacher education for the primary sector in particular is the importance of Content and Language Integrated Learning as a generic aspect of Education programme design.

The recognition given in the government language policy document *Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge/A 20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language* (2010) to the importance of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) both in schools and in Colleges of Education is very encouraging. Not only is there evidence that CLIL is effective, but there is community support for it and, like initiatives based on the CEFR, it benefits from the experience of an international community of practice (see Ó Duibhir in this volume). However, it does pose challenges for initial teacher education, especially in relation to the linguistic competence and confidence levels of lecturing staff offering CLIL modules in areas they would normally teach through English. This difficulty in itself raises the question of the wisdom of discontinuing Academic Irish programmes that inter alia embodied the principles of CLIL. High

levels of L2 oral competence and literacy among teacher educators outside Irish Departments or Irish Language Units will be necessary to sustain a CLIL approach on initial teacher education programmes, but it is yet to be seen how exactly a national language policy that favours CLIL will interact with a national literacy strategy that is not overly concerned with L2 literacy (DES, 2011).

A final and compelling rationale for differential provision in the teaching and learning of Irish in initial teacher education programmes is the need to provide for the language learning needs of student teachers with high levels of (L1 or L2) Irish language proficiency. These are students who have successfully acquired Irish either at home or through the education system, and who have developed what Jim Cummins terms 'identities of competence' in the language (Cummins, 2010). These students could be introduced to the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (Mehlmauer-Larcher, 2011) from the beginning of their initial teacher education programme, and they have the potential to develop as Irish-language subject specialists and subject leaders. If the weaknesses in Irish language teaching at primary level are to be addressed, there will be a need for 'inspiring pedagogy' (Cummins, 2010) and for teachers with the deep linguistic, sociolinguistic and cultural awareness and knowledge required not only to support and motivate their own pupils, but also to assist and encourage colleagues and parents. Developing such specialists is also crucial if the teaching and learning of Irish in our schools is to be informed by up-to-date research. The conventional way of measuring levels of achievement in higher education is the degree system, now systematised more than ever before through the Bologna process. Degree-level qualifications in Irish are vital for post-graduate research related to the teaching and learning of Irish. It was surprising and disappointing that this was ignored in recent policy recommendations relating to initial teacher education. If we believe that there is a need for subject specialists at primary level, and a need for ongoing research on the teaching and learning of Irish, then at least some of the colleges must be in a position to offer a course of study leading to a Level 8 degree, ensuring the possibility of progressing with that specialism to Level 9 and 10.

Are the proposals for change made above realistic? What are the consequences of ignoring them? The answer to these questions can be found in the Council of Europe's *Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe*, where support for policies to promote plurilingualism in education is justified by a number of key principles, which link language education with citizenship in a European and global context. I list them here, though each is explicated in detail in the Guide itself (Council of Europe, 2007: 35-6):

- Language rights are part of human rights
- The exercise of democracy and social inclusion depends on language education policy
- Economic or employment opportunities for the individual and the development of human capital in a society depend in part on language education policy
- Individual plurilingualism is a significant influence on the evolution of a European identity
- Plurilingualism is plural
- Plurilingualism is possible
- Plurilingual education is practical

These are challenging times for initial teacher education, and it is important, as educationalists review recent initiatives and plan for further transformation, that a

commitment to best practice is at the centre of all deliberations. As this paper goes to press, it is encouraging to read the Department of Education and Skills' *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022* (2016) and to note in particular the intention of the Department and the Teaching Council of Ireland to investigate the possibility of linking the assessment of student teachers' Irish language proficiency with TEG. It is also encouraging that a national conference held in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, in 2015 to review curricular developments in the teaching of Irish at third level since the publication of the New Irish Language Syllabus, was attended by representatives from the Department of Education and Skills and from a wide range of organisations interested in graduate competencies. The Syllabus Project initiated by a dedicated national working group is an example of what can be achieved when academic and pedagogic resources and insights are pooled efficiently. It was an important step in creating a collaborative inter-institutional structure through which ongoing planning for a more inspirational future in Irish language teaching and learning would be possible. Further steps need to be taken, however, if the achievement of professional competence is to be acknowledged as a core objective in language course provision at third level. For the full potential of recent initiatives to be realised in the years ahead, their significance as language education initiatives with local, national and international implications needs to be acknowledged by the wider Education community. The initiatives need to be embedded in appropriate degree structures, particularly within initial teacher education programmes, and they need to be supported by an ambitious and forward-looking national language education policy.

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