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A Consideration of Language Teacher Education in Ireland, North and South.

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Abstract

This paper surveys the context of language teacher education in Ireland, north and south, across the sectors (primary and post-primary, Irish, Modern Languages and English as an Additional Language). The discussion and analysis that follows arose through the contributions by language teacher educators to a conference organised by the Queen's University of Belfast under the auspices of the Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South (SCoTENS)¹. The authors suggest that a traditional view of diversification in language education, focusing on Irish and the main European languages, must be reconsidered in light of the new demographic and linguistic landscape of Ireland, North and South.

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¹ A full account of the conference discussion is provided by the same authors in the *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Vol. 4, No. 11, September 2014, http://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol_4_No_11_September_2014/2.pdf

Introduction

Modern Languages (ML) education, including Irish, in Ireland North and South, seems to constantly alternate between states of concern and optimism. The take-up of languages in UK schools has fluctuated over the years, but the trend on the whole is downwards. Post-primary study of languages flourished for a while with the introduction of compulsory languages at Key Stages 3 and 4 in the National Curriculum in Britain and the Northern Ireland curriculum (1988, 1989 respectively), but the introduction of the Revised Northern Ireland Curriculum in September 2007 rendered modern languages optional at Key Stage 4 (age 14-16), and has adversely affected the numbers of pupils choosing language study, as has been the case in Britain, where ML numbers have fallen off alarmingly since KS4 languages became optional in 2002 (CILT, 2006). In Britain, languages in the primary school have been promoted in recent years in order to offset this trend and motivate pupils through an early start in languages, but this may be placing too great a burden of expectancy on the primary sector. Nevertheless, the growing support for languages in primary school is important and will develop.

The Modern Languages in Primary School Initiative (MLPSI) and the Post-Primary Languages Initiative in the Republic of Ireland have done much to increase diversification of provision (Post-Primary Languages Project, online; NCCA Primary Languages, online) but also raise the question of the relationship between English, Irish, and Foreign Languages in provision. Sadly, MLPSI has now ceased due to lack of funding. Diversification in Modern Languages in the post-primary sector has also been an area of focus in Northern Ireland (Neil and McKendry, 2006). The requirement of a modern language for matriculation to the National University of Ireland ensures the numbers of pupils choosing to study a ML to Leaving Certificate (18+) level, where French remains the most commonly learnt language. However, there is no guarantee that the requirement of a modern language for matriculation will continue. Indeed, signs are not good.

The traditional view of diversification, focusing on Irish and the main European and world languages, must, however, be reconsidered in light of the new demography and linguistic landscape of Ireland, North and South, with the recent influx of large numbers of immigrants and workers speaking languages not traditionally offered in our schools, and in light of increased levels of international travel and business. There is lack of a clear policy with regard to the introduction of new languages to the curriculum in the Republic of Ireland that has led to a haphazard rather than a planned approach (Little, 2003). In recent years syllabi have been introduced for Russian, Arabic, Japanese and Chinese. Educational reform in the junior cycle in Irish post-primary education offers much potential. Several questions, however, arise in this context: should the junior cycle focus on supporting pupils in developing their common identity as Irish and European citizens at this level, and leave it until senior cycle for them to learn non-European languages? Or, should a variety of short language courses be introduced in junior cycle and in Transition Year in non-traditional foreign languages, (e.g. Chinese, Arabic)? Can junior cycle short courses be offered in ways that do not affect adversely the learning of European languages? What are the implications for teacher education? There is greater linguistic diversity across the island of Ireland today than ever

before, and the need for Irish people to learn foreign languages for purposes of travel, business, or emigration has never been greater. These realities present challenges that need to be taken on board in the context of any decision about the introduction of new languages to the curriculum. In addition, education providers need to support all teachers in addressing the needs of English language learners (ELLs), (e.g. the School of Education at the National University of Ireland, Galway, offers input in pre-service teacher education in this context).

The increasing linguistic awareness among the general population is welcome. Allied to this is the long overdue recognition in 2007 of Irish as a working language in the European Union and the Official Languages Act in the Republic (2003), both of which are essential moves towards normalizing the situation of the language. A comparative overview of national language policies internationally would also be welcome and informative. Recent years have seen the emergence of Language Strategies in these islands. Strategies have been produced for England and Wales, while Scotland is focusing on the Curriculum for Excellence. The Department of Education in Northern Ireland has launched a Northern Ireland Languages Strategy while the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) intends to present a Strategy for Indigenous or Regional Minority Languages to the Northern Ireland Executive in due course. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) in the Republic of Ireland has recently launched a consultation process for a Foreign Languages in Education Strategy for the Republic of Ireland and the Strategy that is due to be completed by summer 2015. Allied to these developments are the Revised Northern Ireland Curriculum and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Primary, Junior and Senior Cycle reviews in the Republic, with their respective demands on teachers and teacher educators. In addition, The Teaching Council in the Republic of Ireland and the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland were established in recent years, and they accredit all teacher education programs in their respective jurisdictions.

These issues should all be considered in the broad context of recent developments at national and European level in the area of language policy, provision and support. The European Union considers modern languages among the basic skills or key competencies required by all its citizens and is concerned to promote excellence in the teaching and learning of languages as well as greater diversity in the range of languages available to learners in the Member States, as witnessed by the European Commission Action Plan, *Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004-2006*. Section II of the Commission's Action Plan report discusses Better Language Teaching and devotes its Paragraph 3 to Language Teacher Training, where it notes,

Language teachers may often feel isolated, unaware of developments elsewhere with the potential to improve their work; they may not have access to adequate professional support networks; it is therefore important to facilitate contacts and effective networks between them at a regional, national and European level. (European Commission, 2003)

SCoTENS: Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South

The Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South (SCoTENS) is a network of 37 colleges of education, university education departments, teaching councils, curriculum councils, education trade unions and education centres in Ireland North and South, each with a responsibility for and interest in teacher education. Established in 2003, SCoTENS brings teacher educators on the island of Ireland together to discuss issues of mutual interest and explore ways of collaborating, and has been involved in supporting a wide range of research, conference and exchange project. The authors of this paper applied for and received funding from SCoTENS to organize a conference in 2009 at the Queen's University of Belfast (QUB) for language teacher educators, primary and post-primary, from the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, in collaboration with NICILT (the Northern Ireland Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research) housed in the QUB School of Education.

A particular aim of the conference was to network and encourage collaboration among the varied sectors represented: North and South; Primary and Post-Primary; Irish and Modern Languages; English, Modern Languages and English as an Additional Language. The primary teacher education institutions in the Republic catering for Irish (Coláiste Phádraig Drumcondra, Marino, Mary Immaculate, Froebel) collaborate regularly through LMTG (Léachtoirí le Múineadh/Teagasc na Gaeilge) to develop resources and expertise for Irish. The SCoTENS conference presented an opportunity to widen and develop this approach. Modern Languages in Northern Ireland includes Irish, while a curricular distinction is made in the Republic between Irish and Modern Languages. A more integrated approach that involved a combining of resources and objectives across all languages, including English (Literacy) and English as an Additional Language was a key aim of the conference.

The primary aim of the conference was to bring together Initial Teacher Educators from Ireland, north and south, from the various sectors: primary, post-primary/secondary, foreign languages, and Irish. The growing awareness of multiple literacies to include English as mother tongue and English as an additional language (EAL) is also recognized. 'Integrated Overviews' of languages education in the two jurisdictions were given in the first session of the conference; these were followed by guest plenary sessions, and input from individual institutions.

Overview of ML provision and practice North and South

In advance of the conference, education institutions were invited to complete a questionnaire, providing rich data on ML education, including linguistic and pedagogic aims, course structures and provision, and research. This section provides an overview of their responses.

A range of pre-service initial primary and post-primary teacher education programs are offered in both jurisdictions, both concurrent (undergraduate degrees) and consecutive (postgraduate certificates and diplomas). All programmes are subject to the regulations and accreditation of their respective teaching councils, the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland and the Teaching Council of

Ireland/An Chomhairle Mhúinteoireachta. The courses are organized in different ways across institutions

The main difference between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland in language education is the provision for Irish in schools and teacher education in the Republic, where all pre-service primary teacher education programs offer Irish and its methodologies to all students. Various modes and patterns of teaching and learning are adopted in the various institutions: lectures, seminars, workshops, tutorials, conversation groups, etc. There is a distinction between Academic Irish (Gaeilge Acadúil) as a specialist subject and Professional Irish (Gaeilge Ghairmiúil) for all primary student teachers. Teaching approaches are catered for to various degrees, as are literature, culture, conversation, etc. Some courses include immersion courses in the Gaeltacht. Some institutions provide for Irish as a first language (NUIG, Coláiste Phádraig elective), and cater for Gaeltacht and Gaelscoil education. Irish is also compulsory in post-primary education in the Republic of Ireland, and this is reflected in the post-primary teacher education provision.

In the past, some institutions in the Republic of Ireland had provided support for modern languages as well as Irish, in primary schools, particularly French and German in the context of the Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative (MLPSI), which introduced French, German, Italian, and Spanish to fifth and sixth classes. However, as noted, funding for this initiative was withdrawn by the Irish government in 2012. St Mary's University College in Belfast focuses on Irish-medium education but also supports Irish in English-medium schools in its BEd Primary course. Stranmillis University College Belfast offers a twelve-week language module, 4 hours per week, in its Year 4 BEd Primary course. Staff expertise covers French, German and Spanish.

The Northern Ireland Curriculum encourages primary schools to teach languages beyond English and Irish in Irish-medium schools. A website for primary languages has been developed by CCEA (the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment) on the curriculum website. The Department of Education (NI) introduced the Primary Languages Programme, providing peripatetic support for primary schools wishing to deliver Spanish, then Irish and, more recently, Polish at Key Stage 1. CCEA and the Education and Library Boards currently provide most teacher support and training for primary languages in Northern Ireland.

In post-primary education in the Republic, a Modern Language is not a curricular requirement although Irish is compulsory up to Leaving Certificate. From 2000 the Post-Primary Languages Initiative sought to diversify the teaching of languages in second level schools in the Republic, with Spanish, Italian, Japanese and Russian as the target languages. More recently, Chinese has been introduced in some schools in Transition Year, and has been offered in the Junior Certificate examination from 2014. No official rationale for the selection of foreign languages has been offered.

The original Northern Ireland Curriculum (1989) required post-primary schools to offer one of French, German, Spanish or Italian. They could then offer Irish as well to fulfil the statutory requirements for Modern Languages. The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 now requires 'Any official language of the

European Union (other than English and, in Irish speaking schools, Irish).’ Since September 2007 a language is no longer compulsory at Key Stage 4 (age 14-16), which will affect the number of student teachers admitted to the Modern Languages PGCE in the future. The Queen's University Belfast Modern Languages PGCE makes specialist provision for French, German, Irish and Spanish.

All student teachers gain practical experience in the classroom during their teacher education program through school placements. NUI Galway moved to a ‘block’ only model in 2011. From 2014 teacher education programs offer student placements in two different types of school (Vocational, Comprehensive, Community, Secondary). The Teaching Council of Ireland requires post-primary student teachers spend a minimum number of hours in school. The length of the teaching practice can vary for the different undergraduate years of the BEd. There have been moves to develop a more formal system of mentoring in the context of partnership schools in the context of the PME and MGO.

Support for the development of student teachers' target language proficiency is central to the undergraduate BEd primary level teaching programs of Irish as an academic subject. Gaeilge Ghairmiúil for all primary student teachers is found in all BEd courses in the Republic. Students on the University of Limerick BA (Education) in Languages taking a language *ab initio* are enrolled in six hours of language study each in first and second year. Students studying a language with Leaving Certificate or equivalent have 4 hours per week.

Postgraduate courses assume that students accepted on the course have achieved a good level of language competence in their undergraduate studies, although some concern was expressed at the language competence of many students, even those who had good honors degrees. Time pressure means that specific language reinforcement or development sessions are not timetabled in all institutions. NUIG timetables one hour per week for part of the year with language tutors drawn from the French, German, Spanish, and Italian departments. All institutions provide support and encourage students to work on their academic language in the university resource centre, language centre or other specialist centre.

All participants saw the need to create conditions that support student teachers in developing target language proficiency. Where appropriate, language specific sessions are conducted in the target language. Micro-teaching sessions support use of the target language in classroom teaching. Feedback on language accuracy is given in all institutions to individual students on university based work, and following observation of lessons on school experience. Gaeltacht courses for students on primary teacher education courses are a valued element. The third year of the BA (Education) in Languages in the University of Limerick is spent abroad in work/academic placements in the countries where the target languages are spoken.

Full-time members of staff serve the undergraduate courses in all institutions, although the Gaeilge Ghairmiúil staff is particularly stretched in all institutions in the Republic where staff have to cater for the whole primary student body. The modern languages module in Mary Immaculate is delivered by a full-time lecturer, seconded from another area. St Mary's Belfast has seven members of staff including a writing fellow to cover the BEd, BA and PGCE IME primary and post-

primary. QUB post-primary PGCE has one full-time lecturer and teaching fellow, with some tutor support to supervise school experience and guest inputs to the university teaching blocks. At NUIG invited target language post-primary teachers offer several support workshops that complement the methodologies course offered by a full-time member of staff in the context of the PME and MGO. The NUIG methodologist contributes to other areas of education programmes in addition to languages. Not all post-primary education programs in the Irish Republic have full-time methodologists. The methodology input in these areas is supplied by staff members from schools who combine school and university duties.

Conclusion

Teacher educator participants at the conference agreed that the opportunity to confer with colleagues from Ireland, North and South, and across the spectrum of language teacher education, primary and post-primary, had been very valuable. Several innovative pedagogical tools, including ICT tools, were examined and were found to support more effective teaching and learning. The conference will hopefully lead to continued effective networking and collaboration. It is worth noting that in October 2014 a network of foreign language post-primary teacher educators, members of which work in six different Irish universities (National University of Ireland, Galway, and Maynooth, University College, Dublin, University College Cork, Trinity College Dublin, University of Limerick) collaborated in a common response to DES's Framework for Consultation on Foreign Languages in Education Strategy for Ireland. That response suggested the need for a more integrated languages curriculum that includes Irish and English as well as English as an Additional Language in addition to foreign languages.

We have seen that there have been major curriculum and structural changes in teacher education in the Republic of Ireland in recent years. Amalgamations and incorporations have become 'buzz' words. Traditional institutes and colleges are facing harsh economic conditions and changing demographics, and new relationships have been forged between institutions. There is need for openness, transparency, democracy, and equality, and there is of course need for continuous professional development if our common future is to be shaped in a positive way. The traditional view of diversification, focusing on Irish and the main European languages must be reconsidered in light of the new demographic and linguistic landscape of Ireland, North and South. As already noted a Languages Strategy for England was introduced in 2002, and Scotland and Wales have also developed a more strategic approach Languages for the Future: The Northern Ireland Languages Strategy was launched in September 2012, and a Foreign Languages in Education Strategy for Ireland is still awaited. It is out hope that language teacher educators from Ireland, North and South, will continue to collaborate and to build bridges between north and south, and east and west, and that each of us will come to appreciate the unique contribution that the other has to offer.

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