

Language Policies in Higher Education Institutions in Ireland: Some Preliminary Findings

Language Policies: An Introduction

The format and nature of language policies differs from one institution to another. However, they usually take the form of a document outlining the languages offered at different levels to both specialist and non-specialist language learners. In other words, a language policy defines the language learning profile of an institution by presenting a considered view of the diversity of languages to be offered and to whom. Policies generally also describe the decision-making structures required to facilitate their development and implementation as well as at least some of the following: teaching and learning procedures designed to support and encourage language learning, desired language learning outcomes, the monitoring and evaluation of student achievement and the quality of language teaching and learning, and, finally, the training and professional development of language teachers.

This paper contains the results of a preliminary study of a range of Irish higher education institutions (HEIs) regarding their language policies¹.

Survey: The Irish Situation

There is increasing recognition across Europe of the importance of institutional language policies in the promotion of language learning by undergraduate students (Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity, 2003). In order to determine the extent to which such policies are being developed in Ireland, a survey of eleven Irish HEIs was conducted. Of the institutions surveyed, eight responded, five being universities and three Institutes of Technology.

The results indicated that only one of the eight institutions has a language policy in place at institutional level with one expressing an intention to develop such a policy in the future. However, even in the case of the institution

which has a policy in place, it does not appear to be operating effectively. For example, the policy states that the institution "...is committed to providing the greatest number of students with an opportunity to acquire and develop skills in other EU languages regardless of their prior level of linguistic achievement" (Institute's Language Policy, pp.1). However, in practice, schools within this institution are reported to have decided to drop languages without institutional resistance. Thus, while the policy is in place in theory, it does not appear to be applied in practice.

In the case of a third institution, there is a five-year *Strategic Plan* in place (<http://www.dcu.ie/president/plan.shtml/>) This plan does not, however, make specific references to languages although it does describe how the institution in question "... led the way in building international student exchanges and international degree programmes" (Section 1). The plan emphasises six cross-disciplinary themes with language learning referred to under the first, "Communication, Arts and Culture", as follows: "Areas to be pursued within this theme include network technology and mobile communications, media and journalism, information filtering and digital technology, multicultural issues, translation studies and technology, Irish-medium education, foreign language pedagogy and the performing arts."

There are no more specific references to language learning. However, later in the plan it is stressed that all "... programmes will include an element explicitly designed to promote responsible global and local citizenship." It is intended that the next strategic plan should also focus on six themes, one of these to be "Internationalisation, Interculturalism and Social Development". This lists the following sub-themes:

- Communication in a social and cultural context
- Intercultural studies
- International studies
- International Communication
- Cross-border studies

It is likely that this theme will have most relevance to the study of foreign languages at this university. However, once again no more detailed guidelines are contained in this strategic plan.

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With regard to the existence of consultation and decision-making structures at institutional level which would facilitate the development of language policies, only one of the institutions surveyed has such structures in place in the form of a *Modern Languages Committee*. The committee includes the following in its terms of reference:

1. To formulate and recommend policies for adoption by Academic Council on all matters relating to the promotion of modern languages in the University;
2. To assist the modern language departments and the Language Centre in the implementation of such policies;
3. To make recommendations to Academic Council concerning the provision of new courses with language components.

The remaining institutions rely on internal departmental meetings to discuss, plan and draft policies for presentation to management or Academic Council.

Structures differ somewhat regarding the coordination of language teaching across institutions. For example, in several of the institutions, language courses for non-specialists are coordinated by a Language Centre. In others, language teaching to both specialists and non-specialists is coordinated within the language departments. Finally, in one of the institutions, there is a Language Centre located within the Language Department.

The results of the survey further indicate that a range of teaching/learning procedures are in place to support and encourage language learning. These include:

- Exchange programmes particularly Erasmus exchanges
- Work placements abroad
- Language credits integrated into degree programmes
- Use of the ELP on a pilot basis
- Provision for web-based materials and learning
- Self-access centres
- Assistantships organised in the target language countries.
- Tandem language exchanges
- Possibility of an additional form of accreditation for languages, such as a diploma

supplement under
consideration

However, it does tend to be the case that exchanges, work placements abroad etc. are compulsory for language students and either optional or not available to non-language students.

Additional comments indicated that, in two of the universities surveyed, learning outcomes are defined in module descriptors, the content of which is determined by the designated module coordinator. However, these learning outcomes are not at present related to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages developed by the Council of Europe. In one of the Institutes of Technology, however, course outcomes are defined in such terms.

With regard to the monitoring and evaluation of student achievement as well as the quality of teaching and learning, a range of structures are in place, the following being a sample:

- Second marking of written and oral examinations internally.
- External examiners allocated to all modules.
- Survey evaluations at the end of semesters.
- President's Award for Excellence in Teaching and Learning
- Quality reviews

Finally, the training and professional development of teachers consists primarily of short courses/seminars on aspects of language teaching and learning with university funding being applied for by the Language Faculty/School/Centre. Examples include the following:

- Personnel departments / Quality promotion offices organise training courses and seminars
- Internal introductory courses in modern media for the purposes of language teaching offered.
- Teaching Support Officers appointed.

Discussion and Implications:

The results indicate that, while only one of the institutions surveyed has an institutional language policy, items, which would be defined by such a plan, are, in some cases, operational in practice. For example, learning outcomes are defined in some of the institutions, the quality of language teaching

and learning is regulated and enhanced, albeit in different ways and to varying degrees, and many of the students avail of for example Erasmus exchanges and tandem learning programmes. However, this is the case primarily for those teaching and learning on core-language programmes, i.e. to language specialists whose degree programmes tend to be composed of at least fifty percent language and language-related modules.

The situation is quite different for non-language specialists. In their case, the opportunity to study a language may or may not be available. Even when it is, many of the teaching and learning procedures designed to support “core” language learning may not necessarily be offered to them.

In other words, the results of this survey indicate a lack of over-arching institutional policies concerning which languages should be offered at which level/s on which programmes. This results in a somewhat ad-hoc approach to the inclusion and/or removal of language and/or supports for language learning on non-specialist programmes in particular with this depending to a large extent on the views of the more powerful individuals involved. In the words of one lecturer, “There was no “higher authority” in existence which was able to assist me in my arguing for the maintaining of languages...If the School of Engineering felt fit to eliminate languages there was no rule to stop them; despite EU policies to support the learning of languages”. In the absence of institutional language policies, decisions on the languages to be offered may not take into account the needs of the students concerned or of society in general.

Thus, if language teaching and learning is to continue at third level in Ireland in a coherent fashion, it is essential that Irish HEIs develop and implement comprehensive language policies at institutional level. Such policies should be rooted in relevant research from a range of disciplines, including foreign language acquisition and pedagogy as well as the socio-economic and political sciences, and should be formulated on the basis of a thorough investigation of Ireland’s language needs in an Irish, European and global context.

EU recommendations on language learning support the teaching of as many languages as possible to as many undergraduates as possible (Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity, 2003). There are many arguments in support of this approach even for those in

primarily English speaking countries such as Ireland.

For example, the view that *English is enough* is somewhat naïve in, economic terms. Ireland is currently classified as “the world’s most globalised economy” (Kearney, 2003 in Keating and Martin, 2004: xv). Thus, Cranfield University/Torc Consulting (2003: 21 in Keating and Martin, 2004: xiii) state that “[P]oor language skills and lacklustre cultural adaptability are unforgivable in such a foreign trade dependent economy”. While it may be possible in some cases to import goods using one’s mother tongue, those who speak the customer’s native language are more efficient and successful exporters. Indeed, according to Jackie Harrison, Director, Social Policy, IBEC² (2001): “A key facet of Ireland’s industrial policy [...] is to encourage the expansion and diversification of exports, in particular within the Euro Zone (European Day of Languages, IBEC 2001). In support of this argument, the results of a recent survey of 111 companies in Ireland, 38% indigenous and 56% multinationals, indicated that 50% of those surveyed believed that extra foreign language capability would benefit their company over the next three years (Languages in Business Survey, IBEC 2001).

In addition, learning a language can also have significant benefits for undergraduates who do not use foreign languages directly in their careers. For example, research in the field of cognitive processing indicates that users of a second language think more flexibly and creatively, demonstrate increased awareness of the nature of language and enjoy improved communication skills in their first language (Cook, 2002: 7, 167, 333). They also indicate those who have already studied a second language find it easier to specialise further in that language and/or acquire an additional language later in life. For example, research conducted by Clyne, Rossi Hunt and Isaakidis (2004) indicates that, when compared with L2 learners, L3 learners tend to be more effective and persistent language learners who are able to benefit from their metalinguistic awareness. In a similar vein Tudor (2004: 9-10) speaks of language learners as being “empowered” by acquiring transferable learning skills which go beyond the confines of a particular level of competence in any given language”. Similarly, many additional transferable skills can also be developed effectively through participation in language learning. These include presentation

² Irish Business and Employers Confederation

and negotiation skills as well as information management, goal setting and time-management (<http://www.skillsproject.tcd.ie/>).

Furthermore, at a deeper level, language learning can foster such broader values as cultural awareness and tolerance, a process described by Williams (2004) as “cultural decentring” or Kramsch (1993) as “being challenged or “unsettled” by the other” while Cook (1999: 4) speaks of a transition “...from knowledge about other countries to positive attitudes towards speakers of other languages, to a heightened sensitivity towards “otherness” of any kind”. Others (Byram and Fleming, 1998) emphasise the “reflexive impact” of language teaching, in that it can result in a focus on and critical reassessment of learners’ own culture.

In the increasingly intercultural environment in which Ireland finds itself today, the education of open-minded, culturally sensitive graduates, who have experience of being a stranger in a foreign culture as well as a deeper understanding of their own, is of paramount importance. Thus, there is a case to be made for offering as many undergraduates as possible the opportunity to learn another language. In order to ensure that this happens, there is an urgent need for the development of institutional language policies.

Many questions remain as to how such policies should be developed. Three models have to date emerged from the initial studies conducted (Tudor, 2004: 11). These are, firstly, the origination of a language policy in a language department or centre, secondly, the drawing up of a policy by senior management and, thirdly, the collaborative development of a policy as part of a consultative process.

Many of the survey respondents also emphasised the fact that a strong incentive will be required if Irish HEIs are to put in place a language policy. Obstacles to the development of such policies include funding and administrative questions as well as, possibly, attitudes at institutional level. As Phipps and Gonzalez (2004, 44) remark, “...modern languages need collegiality, need the real vision of a university, not balance sheets and declarations of debt”. The suggestion (Chambers, 2003) that a requirement that a copy of the institution’s language policy be included in applications for funding for EU projects, may represent a form of extrinsic

motivation which could be effective in encouraging the development of such policies.

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